

KESTREL EDGE
AND OTHER PLAYS

WILFRID GIBSON ¹⁸⁷²₁₈₉₈



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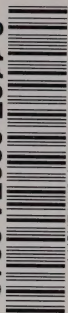
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KESTREL EDGE
AND OTHER PLAYS

PLAYS BY
WILFRID GIBSON

BORDERLANDS, 1914

KRINDLESYKE, 1922

DAILY BREAD (*New Version*), 1923

KESTREL EDGE

AND OTHER PLAYS

BY

WILFRID GIBSON

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To
PERCY WITHERS

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UPB

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LOVERS' LEAP

PERSONS

ANGUS EARNSHAW, *a young farmer.*

LUCY EARNSHAW, *his wife.*

RACHEL EARNSHAW, *his mother.*

ALEC EARNSHAW, *his brother.*

ESTHER BURN

ADAH BURN, *her* } *Farm servants.*

younger sister }

SCENE I

SCENE: *The kitchen of Windwhistle, a Border farmstead, on the evening of May term-day: LUCY EARNSHAW, at the table in the middle of the room, ironing: RACHEL EARNSHAW, sitting by the hearth, darning hose.*

RACHEL: You've done it!

LUCY: Done it?

RACHEL: Sure enough.

LUCY: And so,

It's I that's done it—I'm to bear the blame?

I'm to sit mumchance, while my servant-girl's

Flaunting her shame to all the countryside:

And everybody guessing . . .

RACHEL: Little call

To waste much wit in guessing.

LUCY: Nay, God knows,

My husband's name's in all the neighbours' mouths

Coupled with thon bold-eyed loose-petticoat.

RACHEL: Neighbours, say you? Buck-rabbits and
jack-hares

Real scandalised at such-like goings-on:

And, hark, a cock-grouse clucks such spicy tattle

Would make a black ram blush!

LUCY: Ay, sure enough,

A gey lone outby God-forsaken neuk,

A woman might get such a hold of him
 He'd dash himself to death for her sake—ay,
 Would leap headlong with her, and never blench,
 If 'twere the only way. He's got the spirit—
 Just such another as the lad who leapt
 In the old story : but the lass, I doubt,
 Is far to seek who'd take the plunge with him ;
 And yet, you never know, you never know :
 He may lie broken at the crag-foot yet :
 He's just the headstrong breed that . . .

LUCY : Mercy me,
 What keeps you raveling about Lovers' Leap ?

RACHEL : I've always had a liking for those lovers :
 They took their road—left talk to other folk.
 It's only deeds that count : that's why, although
 I loathe the things men do, I envy them
 The doing. Men can act, while women nag,
 Or eat their hearts out, brooding : though there once
 Were womenfolk who scorned to sit and sulk :
 But the days of Jaels and Jezebels are done.

LUCY : And why should Angus jump from Lovers'
 Leap ?

RACHEL : If Angus loved, he'd be a breakneck lover :
 But it wouldn't be for your sake, or for limmers
 Like them you've sacked, and happen will live to rue
 The sacking of.

LUCY : So I'm to sit down under . . .

RACHEL : Much sitting down at Windwhistle for you,
 Or anyone, if you can't keep a wench !

LUCY : They aren't all baggages : and, whether or no,
 I only did my duty.

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RACHEL: How'll you prevent . . .

LUCY: Give him a piece of my mind.

RACHEL: He's had a taste already. I'd be doubting
You'd a deal left to spare.

LUCY: I'll let him know!

RACHEL: A waste of precious knowledge:—muckle
good,

School-teaching him—pearls before swine . . .

LUCY: What's that?

RACHEL: You're not a scholar: you'd not understand.

LUCY: He'll understand, before I've done with him:
He hasn't heard the last.

RACHEL: He'll hear the last
Before you've vented your spite: and 'twill be he
Will settle when he's had enough, I reckon;
Or I don't know the strain.

LUCY: You never fancy . . .

RACHEL: Never: I only know. I've learnt my lesson.
It takes a braw louse to browbeat a lion.
In this world, Lucy, you've to . . .

LUCY: What a world!

RACHEL: The world's as the Lord made it: He'd
His reasons,
Doubtless: and, whether or no, 'twould puzzle you
To make a better in six days, my lady:
And certain-sure the Lord won't make it over
Every five minutes just to suit our notions.
A rare world it would be if every jenny
Had her own string, and could pull! Lump it, or
like it,
It's all we'll get this side the coffin-lid:

Yet, what a tug I'd give, if I'd the chance!
 I'd turn things topsy-turvy, if I'd got
 To frizzle in the devil's frying-pan
 For ever after. I'd serve some folk out.
 But I was speiring what you mean to do?

LUCY: To do?

RACHEL: Ay, do: the braw Windwhistle cocks
 Have never yet been cowed by clockers' cackle.

LUCY: Do? There's not much that I can do, God
 help me!

RACHEL: Nay, I was duberous you'd the spunk for
 doing:
 You're not the breed.

LUCY: You only said just now,
 We can't change aught.

RACHEL: But we'd be wattikins
 Never to try.

LUCY: What can I do?

RACHEL: Naught, naught:
 You're not the mettlesome stuff that might be doing.
 You'd be no match for Angus: for all your clash,
 You're a weak brashy body. Devil kens,
 I've little room to talk: though I, at your age,
 Was twice the woman you'll ever be, I'd not
 A chance with Jake. 'Twill take you all your time
 To do as much as I did.

LUCY: And what's that?

RACHEL: To hold your tongue.

LUCY: I'll never let my husband . . .

RACHEL: You'd pit yourself against an Earnshaw
 —you!

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A pretty puling poppet? Ay, you're pretty:
That's why he married you: you took his fancy:
But, if your airs and graces cannot hold him,
Flyting won't bring him to heel. 'Twas rosy cheeks,
No randy's red face, dimples, and not crows' feet
That caught the callant. A smile the wrong way up
Is a smile no longer: so you'd better trim
The corners of your mouth: and if your prattle
No longer pleases, keep your saucy tongue
Safe out of mischief behind your girning teeth.
Then you—but you were never mate for Angus.

LUCY: Yet, he's my husband.

RACHEL: Ay, but not your man.

I've yet to see the wench should wed an Earnshaw:
Though I, for my part, had the wit to ken
I wasn't Jake's marrow, and let him gan his gait:
So it was me he turned to at the last.
Yet, who knows, if he'd only had the luck
To marry his proper mate, the wife to hold him,
She might have made a husband even of Jake.
You cannot dam a burn in spate with straw,
Or stoke a furnace with fluff, or curb a stallion
With cobweb: and I couldn't satisfy
Jake's hunger: so he spent himself in seeking
A satisfaction that he never found
In this world, leastways—happen, hell might hold . . .

LUCY: You seem to glory in his wickedness.

You talk like that, though only now you said . . .

RACHEL: I could have killed him: and it's true
enough.

A hundred times I'd straked him in my heart,

And gloated over that body, cold at last,
 Before the red bull gored him—ay, it took
 A bull, Windwhistle Champion, to finish Jake :
 No mankeen heifer could face him : and he died,
 With life, a red-hot fury in his reins.
 Then I was sorry.

LUCY : Sorry he should perish
 In all the pride of wickedness ?

RACHEL : Nay, sorry
 Jacob should perish in the pride of life,
 With such a lust of living on him.

LUCY : Yet,
 You could have killed . . .

RACHEL : If I'd not understood him.
 It's understanding gars you hold your hand,
 Even when the fingers twitch to grip the knife-haft.

LUCY : God ! a nice family I've married into—
 A house of devils !

RACHEL : Smell the reek of singeing ?
 Happen, it's only your iron. Ay, poor doll,
 There's blood, not sawdust, in the Earnshaws' veins :
 And Angus—though his story may end different :
 He's young ; and still has time to meet his marrow
 At some chance cross-roads, in the market-place ;
 Or she may walk in here at any moment.

LUCY : Not while I live.

RACHEL : So, you've a mind to pitch
 Yourself headlong from Lovers' Leap ? Not you !
 And, anyway, you'd need to leap alone.

LUCY : She shall not cross . . .

RACHEL : Ay, you've the bragging tongue :

RACHEL : Ay, it kept dumb, though many's the time
I've bitten

My lips until I tasted the salt blood
To keep my tongue from lashing out. And you . . .

LUCY : Well, any way, I sacked the wenches.

RACHEL : Ay,

But can you keep it up? You've flicked the flies off,
For other flies to settle. When I speak
Of doing, I mean doing once and for all.

LUCY : I'd liefer die than let . . .

RACHEL : Hark!

LUCY : What do you hear?

RACHEL : Old Bessie clattering through the ford :
they're coming,

Angus and Alec, and who else, de'il kens!

LUCY : Who else? Two servant-girls my husband's
hired

To hoe and weed, pick stones, and muck the byre ;
And they'll soon learn who's mistress.

RACHEL (*rising and throwing open the yard door*) :
True for you :

We'll all soon learn who's mistress, sure enough.

*(Heard without—a grind of wheels and clatter of
hoofs ; the swinging back of a gate ; the
noise of a cart rumbling into the yard and
pulling up ; the clashing-to of the gate ; a
sound of voices ; the jingling and stamping
of a horse being unyoked ; then the tread of
steps approaching the door. ESTHER and
ADAH BURN, the new farm-servants, enter,
carrying between them a small, rope-tied*

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wooden trunk which they set down on the threshold. ESTHER BURN is a strapping girl of twenty with still, dark eyes. RACHEL and LUCY EARNSHAW stare at her, fascinated, without a word, while she stands quietly looking straight before her, as though she did not see them. ADAH BURN is a slight, pretty girl of seventeen with restless eyes and a petulant mouth.)

ADAH (*tossing her head*): Well, when you've taken stock of us, perhaps

You'll show us to our beds. We've had our tea—
Thank you for asking! And I'm too dead sleepy
To try a staring-match with anyone:
And thon old pig-cart's joggled my poor bones
Till I'm all aches. I've not been used to pig-carts.

RACHEL: Nor aught but Shanks's mare, and that ill-shod.

There'll be no pig-cart when you quit: best order
Your ladyship's brougham to call for you, or learn
To keep a civil tongue, wench.

ADAH: Civil tongues
Seem easily kept in this dumb house.

ESTHER: Whisht, Adah.

RACHEL (*lighting a candle, and going towards the door leading into the passage*): I'll show you to your attic. Fetch your kist:
And mind don't dunt the walls, or bash the stair-treads:
They're weak, already, with bumping up and down
Of wenches' boxes every hiring-day.

ADAH: Come, Esther, don't stand gaping like an owl:

No call for you to be struck staring-silly,
 Though it seems we've happened on a hoolets' nest.
 If you can't speak up for yourself, at least catch
 hold

Your end of the box; and let's away to bed.

ESTHER: Whisht, Adah, whisht!

ADAH: Nay, I'll say what I like!
 I'll not be hushed by you or anyone:
 I'm not a bairn now.

ESTHER: Nay—would God you were!

ADAH: "Hush-a-bye baby on the tree-top"? Ay,
 'Twould suit somebody's games to keep me a bairn,
 To hustle out of sight when ever a man
 Keeks round the doorcheek, eh? Oh, but you're sly!
 You think I'm simple, but I ken as much
 Of men . . .

ESTHER: Pray God, you never ken as much!

RACHEL (*muttering*): "When the wind ceases, the
 cradle will fall."

ADAH (*to ESTHER*): You keep
 Your breath to cool your porridge, and your prayers
 For them that ask you for them, lass.

RACHEL: "And down
 Tumbles baby and cradle and all." But come along:
 I can't stand here, while you two choose to squabble—
 Wasting the candle. Are you coming, or no?

*(The two girls lift the box; follow RACHEL
 EARNSHAW out of the kitchen, and are soon
 heard climbing the stairs. When RACHEL
 returns, LUCY is still standing, gazing after
 them abstractedly.)*

But, dangerous?—just about as dangerous
 As any other frightened hen. Shoo! Shoo!
 Where are the lasses—packed them off already?
 Well, they'd be tired.

RACHEL: What do they call the wenches?

ANGUS: Burn.

RACHEL: Sisters?

ANGUS: Ay.

RACHEL: Unlike enough, to be so.

ANGUS: Young Alec's flame is Adah, and the
 other . . . (Pauses.)

RACHEL: Well, well: and so, you cannot mind her
 name?

Perhaps, Alec . . .

ALEC: Ay, it's Esther.

RACHEL: And the virgin

Found favour in the king's sight.

LUCY: What's that you're mumbling?

RACHEL: You wouldn't understand: it's Bible-talk.

LUCY: This wicked house!

RACHEL: That you're the mistress of?

ANGUS: Ay, ay, there's mistresses and mistresses.

But dangerous, you said? I've never met

A dangerous woman yet. I'd like to tame . . .

I'd swap Windwhistle for a spice of danger.

RACHEL: You're lucky, if you lose no more than
 that.

SCENE II

SCENE : *The same, about six o'clock the next evening :*

RACHEL and LUCY EARNSHAW *setting the table for tea.*

RACHEL (*going towards the window and looking out*) :

Time they were knocking off for tea—gey rough
On them, to set them picking stones the first day.

LUCY : I don't see why : they're paid for picking
stones.

RACHEL : You've never done it ?

LUCY : Not I ! I've never been
A servant : but the likes of them are used
To field-work.

RACHEL : Ay, they're used to breaking their backs
To earn their own, and other people's, bread.

LUCY : Well, someone's got to do it. I don't see . . .

RACHEL : You don't ; and yet you talk. If you'd
picked stones
From six to six, as I've done in my time,
Happen, 'twould open your eyes, and shut your mouth.

LUCY : My father'd have thought shame to set me to
it.

RACHEL : And rightly : it's no job for any girl :
And thon lass Adah doesn't look over strong.

LUCY : Tut, tut : 'twill do the brazen bildert good
To bend her back a little : and anyway
Limmers the like of her are born and bred
To such-like jobs ; they've always had to do it :
And so, don't feel . . .

RACHEL : Not being flesh and blood ?

LUCY : Well, beggars can't be choosers.

RACHEL : If they could
Some of us would change places. But there's naught
Of the beggar about the Burns : they've got some
spirit,

Thon lasses : and, for all her quiet ways,
Esther's the prouder of the two, I take it.
Though I'm none easy daunted, I shouldn't care
To cross her will, or touch the quick of her pride.

LUCY : Byre-mucker's pride !

RACHEL : Pride doesn't always sit
With folded hands in the parlour.

LUCY : Well, it seems,
Angus is none too tender of their pride :
He kens the way to take with such : I trust
He'll keep them at it, till they sweat the starch
out.

RACHEL : Angus is like his father, hard on women :
He uses them ; they're naught but bones and thews
To hoe, pick stones, and muck the byre for him ;
And only flesh and blood to serve his pleasure.

LUCY : Well, thank the Lord, he doesn't seem too
soft . . .

RACHEL : Such men are never soft with womenfolk,
As you and I ken to our cost : their love's
A spark struck out of iron ; and, while it chars
The windlestraw, it leaves the coulter unscathed
To plough fresh stubble.

LUCY : Well, you will be talking :
And doubtless you mean something, if I'd list

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RACHEL : Your sister, likely . . .

ESTHER : Nay, she never knew :
I never let on to her why we'd to quit.

RACHEL : Well, anyway, at Windwhistle, I'd hazard,
Your sister's safe enough : a decent lad
Is Alec : and she's not the sort to take
The fancy of a man like . . . but I'm havoring.

ESTHER : You mean that . . .

RACHEL : I mean nothing : I'm just clashing
For clashing's sake, like an ill-sneckit gate :
And you're no " whistle-and-I'll-come-to-thee-my-lad."

ESTHER : I've no fear for myself : but if harm come
To Adah, there'll be bloodshed.

RACHEL : Bloodshed, woman !
You're crazy, surely.

ESTHER : Ay, I'm well-nigh crazed—
Nigh driven desperate since my mother died,
Chivvied from place to place. Why can't folk let
Two decent lasses earn their bread in peace ?
Why must men always pester . . .

RACHEL : Mercy me !
But I've struck out the sparks, and no mistake.
So that's the secret of the brooding eyes
And tight-shut lips ? Lass, I was only trying
To see if I could kindle you : and it seems
I'm like to burn my fingers, for my pains.
I always was a one for playing with fire :
Happen I'll burn the house about my ears,
Before I'm through. But I was only gabbing :
You mustn't listen to my clatterjaw.
I only . . .

(*ADAH rises, and she and ESTHER go into the scullery together, when a sound of splashing is heard. Presently LUCY EARNSHAW enters from the passage.*)

LUCY : They're back ?

RACHEL (*taking the teapot from the hob*) : The wenchies are ; and fair trashed out.

Angus is hard.

ANGUS EARNSHAW *enters, followed by ALEC.*

ANGUS : Hard—and who says I'm hard ?
Not you, Lucy, I warrant : you always swear
I'm over-easy with wenchies. Any limmer
Can twist me round her finger : that's the song
You're singing me to sleep with every night.

ESTHER and ADAH BURN *enter from the scullery.*

Here's Adah, now : she doesn't say I'm hard ?
She's had an easy day.

ADAH : An easy day !
I'll never work another day like that.

ANGUS : True, true : for I've been gently breaking
you in :
I don't drive fillies overhard at first.
You'll learn what working means before the week's out.
But Esther's broken already ; she doesn't waste
Her wind : her withers are unwrung. I reckon
She's ready for another day's work now.

RACHEL : She keeps her counsel, like Dick Dobson's
nag,

Does Esther. When the galled jade doesn't wince,
Best drive her cannily, and watch her eye.

ADAH: She's got no spirit; but he won't drive me.

ANGUS: I won't?

ADAH: You won't.

ANGUS: Say that again: "You won't
Drive me."

ADAH: You won't . . . God knows, there'll be no need
For driving! I thought . . . but you've a way with
you. . . .

ANGUS: I've yet to find the filly I can't master:
So don't try on your flighty tricks with me.

RACHEL: Ay, son, but if you must drive hard,
take care
It's not the quiet mare that breaks your neck.

ANGUS: The quiet mare? You mean . . .

LUCY: Stop yammering
Of mares and fillies—it's not over-nice
To talk of women so—and let's have tea:
It's getting cold.

ANGUS: Well, I must have a wash.
Come, Alec lad, no use to stand there, gaping;
She's got no eyes for you: p'raps when you've sluiced
The muck off she may like your bonnie mug.

ALEC: You hold your tongue, or I'll . . .

(Breaks off.)

ANGUS: Well, razor-wits,
You'll what? Love's sharpening you; and at this rate
You'll soon have edge enough to cut yourself.

RACHEL: And Angus aye likes playing with edged
tools.

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ANGUS : And who would handle blunt ? You cannot
have
Too keen a cutting edge.

RACHEL : True, when the haft's
In your own hand.

LUCY : Rachel, you're havoring :
You know that Angus never lets anyone else
Handle his tools.

RACHEL : Tools, whiles, turn in the hand.

SCENE III

SCENE : *The same, five days later, on Sunday afternoon.*
The kitchen is empty, but voices are heard in the
scullery, and presently LUCY EARNSHAW enters,
carrying a trayful of newly washed dinner-dishes,
which she sets down on the table. As she begins to
arrange them on the dresser, RACHEL EARNSHAW
follows with two wet towels which she hangs before
the fire to dry.

RACHEL : A burnt bairn dreads the fire : but a burnt
woman,
It seems, will only shove her fist in further.
Well, little use my talking. If you're bent
On making a cinder of yourself, you've got to.
I can't prevent . . .

LUCY : I've got to do my duty.

RACHEL : Your duty—ay, we all must do our duty.
They taught us that at school : “ England expects . . . ”
How does it run ? And then he clapt his spyglass

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Sunday clothes, enters from the passage, and is crossing to the yard-door when LUCY EARNSHAW looks up and speaks.)

LUCY : Where are you bound for now ?

ESTHER (*stopping*) : I hardly ken :
I was just thinking I would take a turn.

LUCY : Ay, servant-lasses can go gallivanting,
While mistresses must slave.

ESTHER : I've done my work.

LUCY : Happen ! And so, you're walking out alone ?
And where's your sister ?

ESTHER : She's not finished dressing.

LUCY : And you can't wait till she's done titivating ?
Dressing ! And you, pranked like a popinjay,
While I'm still in my coarse-apron. Some folk might
Make bold to ask where the likes of you can find
The money for such fakish flerds—not I !
I wasn't born yesterday, though I am a wife—
Only an honest wife : and I'm none curious.

ESTHER : I've worked to pay for every stitch I've on.

LUCY : Worked ? Happen ! Don't you dare to look
at me
Like that. I'm mistress here ; and won't let servants—
Let alone a barefaced . . .

*(Hesitates, daunted by the look in ESTHER's eyes ;
but begins to speak again, as ESTHER turns
to go on her way.)*

LUCY : Not so fast, my lass :
I want to have a word with you.

ESTHER : The word
You couldn't find just now ?

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Rachel is right: they're just my husband's . . .

ESTHER: Woman!

LUCY: You call me "woman"? I'll teach you who it is
You're calling "woman": I'm your mistress yet.

ESTHER: My mistress should rather die than . . .

LUCY: Happen you're right:
But I, what can I do, when my own man . . .

ESTHER: I'm sorry . . .

LUCY: Sorry? Now you're mocking me.

ESTHER: Mocking you? Nay!

LUCY: Then I'll not have your pity.
My stars, to think I married to be pitied
By a loose-petticoat! Of all the brass!
You think you can afford to pity me?
Of all the bold-faced trollops! I ken your sort;
You don't take me in with mum, sneaky ways,
And staring like a silly. I've got your measure:
And I can tell you one thing, my fine lady—
Your day will be a short one here; and when
You're gone, I'll still be mistress of Windwhistle:
And so you cannot say I haven't warned you.

(ESTHER stands, steadily regarding LUCY.)

What are you waiting for?

ESTHER: You've done?

LUCY: I've done.

And now I may have time to go and dress,
Though I can't rig myself in such fine feathers
As my own servants. I'd think shame to wear . . .

(She breaks off, daunted by ESTHER's eyes, takes
off her apron, makes a show of folding it
with deliberation, and puts it in a drawer of

the dresser ; then goes out by the passage-door. ESTHER stands for a moment, as though dazed, looking after her ; then turns slowly towards the yard-door, but stops, startled, as she sees ANGUS EARNSHAW, standing in the doorway, watching her. He steps in, and crosses to the hearth, taking some strands of whipcord out of his pocket. ESTHER goes on her way ; but as she reaches the door ANGUS calls to her softly.)

ANGUS : Esther !

(ESTHER stops, but without turning or speaking.)

I want you. Where are you away to ?

To Lovers' Leap ? Ay, thon's the place to sit

On a fine afternoon—but, not alone.

Just bide a moment, lass : I want you here.

I've got to make a whip-lash, and need someone

To keep a hold of the cord-ends, while I plait—

Someone who'll not let go. You've got a grip.

I mind you hanging on when that nowt, Alec,

Tripped, and let go the lead, as he was taking

The red bull—or the red bull taking him. . . .

(ESTHER turns and comes slowly towards him, holding out her hand for the cords, which he gives her.)

What fingers for a wench ! I shouldn't care

To feel them at my thrapple, or have a welt

Across the jaw from such a neave as that.

But you're no scarting spitfire, letting fly

When a man least expects it. You've no need :

You've got too good a grip ; and can afford

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To bide your time, as I'm learning to my cost.
 But that will keep until . . . This won't take long:
 And then we'll go together. I've a word
 I want to say to you, with no one by—
 Not that I mind eavesdroppers: I'm the master
 In my own house, and brook no interference:
 But it's as well . . .

ESTHER: Say all you've got to say
 Now. When I walk, I walk alone.

ANGUS: You do?
 By God, that's so! I never kenned a lass
 Gan her own gait so quietly: it's that—
 Just that, has done for me.

ESTHER: Done?

ANGUS: Oh, you ken—
 You must, when I . . . But it will keep till we're
 Perched snug together . . .

ESTHER: Say all you've got to say
 Here. I'll not hearken to a single word
 You can't speak openly.

ANGUS: So, you defy me?
 Then I'll say all right out.

ESTHER: Best hold your peace
 Now . . .

ANGUS: So you've changed your mind?

ESTHER: Now and for ever.

ANGUS: You threaten me? God's truth, I've never let
 A woman talk to me like that: and I'll . . .
 You're the first wench that's ever wanted to—
 Leastways, no other's dared. But you've defied me
 To speak out now: and I'll not 'bate a word—

36 KESTREL EDGE AND OTHER PLAYS

Oh, you must ken, for all your quiet ways,
 And those still eyes ! You've well-nigh driven me mad—
 Looking right through me, without looking at me ;
 And never speaking, never letting on
 You knew I lived in the same world with you.
 But you're none cold : you've fire to match my fire,
 Though yours burns steadier. Esther, woman . . .

ESTHER : You dare
 To touch me !

ANGUS : You ! To talk like any fizgig
 That waits for kisses in among the stacks !
 You're not that sort : I've had my fill of them.
 Nay ! Don't mistake me, Esther. You're not the first ;
 But you're the last, so help . . . But where's the need
 Of oaths ? You know—you know . . . Oh, you must
 feel . . .

Whom God hath joined . . .

ESTHER : You dare !

ANGUS : Dare ? And why not ?
 It's true this time ; although it was a lie
 On the parson's lips, when I was tied to Lucy.
 Dare Esther—I'd dare hell and all for you. . . .
 And you'll be mistress of Windwhistle—ay !
 I'm master in my own house ; and you'll be mistress.
 Thon doll . . .

ESTHER : I'm through with Windwhistle.

ANGUS : You're through ?

ESTHER : I leave to-morrow morning.

ANGUS : That's the spirit
 Rouses my blood. Oh, you can madden me !
 Meet me to-night at Lovers' Leap.

ESTHER : I'd best
 Be packing up my traps.

ANGUS : You mean you'll go !

ESTHER : I and my sister leave to-morrow morning.

ANGUS : You leave—you leave ? By God, you shall
 not go !

I've hired you, wench : and I'm your master still.

ESTHER : My master !

ANGUS : Ay, you'll learn it to your cost.

ESTHER : Haven't I paid the price already ?

ANGUS : Well,
 As you will have it so, so let it be.
 I'll tame you, yet. You'd better change your gown.

ESTHER : My gown ?

ANGUS : If you'd not clarty it : 'twould be
 Wasteful to dragglesuch fine feathers. Come !
 Don't stand there staring : I don't pay you wages
 For gaping like a stoorded ewe. I want
 The byre mucked out.

ESTHER : That's not my job.

ANGUS : Your job's
 To do my bidding while you're still my servant :
 And you're my servant, bound ; you cannot quit
 Without a quarter's notice, you know well.

ESTHER : I do no jobs on Sunday afternoon.

ANGUS : Well, I've been offering you a pleasanter job—
 A Sunday job, and all : but you don't fancy . . .
 Though, happen, now you'd like to change your mind ?

ESTHER : I'll muck the byre.

*(The passage-door opens, and ADAH BURN, in
 outdoor clothes, enters hurriedly, as if late*

38 KESTREL EDGE AND OTHER PLAYS

*for a tryst, and crosses the kitchen towards
the yard-door.)*

ANGUS: Well, there is no accounting
For tastes—what say you, Adah? Esther swears
She'd rather stop and muck the byre, than take
A stroll.

ADAH (*stopping and turning*): The byre—on Sunday
afternoon?
She's crazy!

(ESTHER goes quietly out by the passage-door.)

ANGUS: So I'm thinking: but I've tamed
A madder mare, before to-day.

ADAH: You've tamed?
You've not been bullying her? It's not your orders?

ANGUS: She took her choice.

ADAH: Well, it gets over me
Why anyone should choose. . . . But she's pig-
headed,

When once she gets a notion. We'd to leave
The last place without wages, just because . . .

(Breaks off.)

ANGUS: Because?

ADAH: Oh, don't ask me! I only know
She got some maggot in her head: and naught
Would satisfy her but a moonlight flitting.

ANGUS: Ay, ay, and you?

ADAH: Oh, I'd to do her bidding
For peace' sake: and I couldn't say I'm sorry,
As things have turned out, that we made the change.

ANGUS: As things have turned out? And you'd do
her bidding
Like a good bairn again, if she . . .

40 KESTREL EDGE AND OTHER PLAYS

I've promised Alec I'd walk out with him.

ANGUS : You'd rather ?

ADAH : Well, we're trysted for to-day :
And he's been waiting.

ANGUS : Ay, you've kept him dangling,
Kicking his heels, until he's nearly hacked
Thon gate to splinters. That's the way to treat them.
You ken a thing or two.

ADAH : I must be stepping.

(As she speaks, ESTHER, in her working clothes, appears in the passage-doorway, and pauses for a moment. ANGUS sees her, but ADAH does not.)

ANGUS (to ADAH) : So, I'm forsaken ?

ADAH : Happen, if you behave,
Next Sunday . . .

(ANGUS starts forward, as if to snatch a kiss, but ADAH eludes him.)

ADAH : Shame ! And you, a married man !

(ADAH runs out, laughing, but ANGUS does not follow. ESTHER waits till she is out of hearing, then walks deliberately up to ANGUS where he stands in the middle of the room, looks him straight in the eyes, and speaks slowly and with difficulty.)

ESTHER : I'll meet you at the Lovers' Leap to-night.

ANGUS (*starting*) : You mean. . . . But why've you changed ?

ESTHER : I can't afford
To wear my Sunday gown for mucking byres.

ANGUS : But you've no call to do that now. Why, lass,
I only jested.

ESTHER : Only !

ANGUS : You didn't fancy

I meant it, eh? Well, you ken better now.

Still, if you hadn't . . . but you've learnt your lesson.

ESTHER : I've learnt my lesson.

ANGUS : Ay, I knew I'd tame you.

ESTHER : And Adah ?

ANGUS : So, that pricked ? What should I want

With thon young flirtigig, when I've got you ?

Still, if you hadn't ! She will have no games !

I'd teach her what her pretty tricks are worth :

And when I'd done with her, she'd change her tune—

Her bragging trumpet blown, she'd whimper and whine

Like a broken-winded wheezy concertina,

She would, the doxy : and you'd be to blame.

But Alec's welcome to her, now that you . . .

The moon will be up by ten o'clock to-night.

We'll sit on the crag together, and look down

On the glinting lough below—a dizzy drop,

If you let go. They say two lovers leapt

Together, in old days ; and didn't strike

The water, as they'd doubtless counted on doing.

They fell among the boulders at the crag-foot—

And their two bodies, smashed to smithereens !

But you and I are not the dizzy sort :

We'll perch there snug together—a risky perch

For lovers ; and that's why it suits my mettle.

(ESTHER turns from him, and walks slowly
towards the yard-door.)

ANGUS : Where are you bound for now ?

ESTHER : To muck the byre.

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ANGUS: God! but I like your spirit: you're my marrow.

(ESTHER goes out, without another word. ANGUS gazes after her, then, turning, sees his mother standing in the passage-doorway, watching him.)

RACHEL (coming into the kitchen): I've just been reading about Sisera:
She was a game one, Jael.

ANGUS: What's that, old raven—
Croaking of bloody stories?

(A quick step is heard in the passage, and LUCY EARNSHAW hurries in, twisting up her hair as she comes.)

LUCY: Well, I never!
What's Esther after in her working clothes?
I was just tidying my hair for tea,
And saw her, in the glass, crossing the yard.

ANGUS: She's gone to muck the byre.

LUCY: This afternoon?
On Sunday? Well, I never heard the like:
And only now, dressed up to the nines and all
For gallivanting! I can't understand
What's taken her—unless you made her do it?
She sauced you, and you bid her?

ANGUS: Ay, I bid her.

LUCY: Well, I must say I like a man that's master
Of his own farm. You're that, and no mistake.
You'll stand no lip from any hind, not you:
And that's the way to treat the baggages.
Eh, Rachel, but you don't know everything:

You've been mistaken—that slut, dangerous!

RACHEL: A burnt bairn dreads the fire. . . . But,
thank the Lord

I'm nothing but a looker-on these days.

SCENE IV

SCENE: *An attic at Windwhistle on Sunday night.*

The wooden trunk stands open in the middle of the room; and ESTHER BURN, still in her working dress, folds her Sunday gown and other garments, and packs them into it. Presently a step is heard on the stairs: the door opens, and ADAH BURN enters, still in her outdoor clothes.

ADAH: I'm fairly trashed.

ESTHER: Where ever have you been?

ADAH: Stravaging over hill and dale with Alec.

ESTHER: You missed your tea.

ADAH: I missed it, and much else

I minded missing a deal more than tea.

ESTHER: What, Adah?

ADAH: Ah, you'd like to know, you would?

But that's to come.

ESTHER: To come?

ADAH: How I'll get through

The week, I cannot think: but, anyway,

It's something to look forward to. Please God,

I'll waste no more fine Sundays!

ESTHER: What's your meaning?

ADAH: That would be telling. You're too curious,
Esther.

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ESTHER : Alec's a decent lad.

ADAH : A decent nowt !

ESTHER : He's fond of you.

ADAH : Ay, ay, he's fond enough :

But others . . . I was never meant to waste . . .

ESTHER : And he'd be faithful.

ADAH : Ay, a safety-match—

Strikes only on the box !

ESTHER : You might do worse.

ADAH : Or better. I was never meant to waste

Myself on a guff like Alec. Mercy me !

We've traiked and traiked, the blessed afternoon,

About the fells, like followers at a funeral,

Muter than tombstones.

ESTHER : You ?

ADAH : I've little enough

To say to boys, though I can talk with men.

And, when the gaby opened his prim lips,

'Twas just to yammer about whaups and peesweeps ;

As if it wasn't bad enough to have

The silly creatures skirling all about us,

Making my blood run cold : and thon lone fells—

I hate the fells : I wouldn't bide a week,

If it wasn't for . . .

ESTHER : Adah, you want to leave ?

ADAH : Leave now ! What ever are you up to there—

Not packing, surely ? Lord, have mercy on us !

There's not to be another moonlight flitting,

Without a penny-piece ?

ESTHER : I'm packing up

To leave in the morning : and you're coming, too.

ADAH : I'm coming ?

ESTHER : You are coming, lass, with me.

ADAH : I'll see you further ! Likely, I'd leave now !

And just because you've quarrelled with the master.

You were a fool to let him bully you, Esther,

And make you muck the byre. I've never yet

Let any man bully me. I wouldn't do

A hand's turn on a Sunday afternoon

For any master : I would sooner die. . . .

Though, I don't know—happen, I would, for one . . .

Might even relish being bullied, who can tell ?

I like a man to be a man, God knows.

But you'll not take offence at such as thon,

And throw up a good place ?

ESTHER : I go to-morrow.

ADAH : I see—I see : he's given you the sack—

You've lost your place ?

ESTHER : I've lost my place.

ADAH : You have ?

But I have not lost mine : I've got no quarrel

With Angus Earnshaw : he's not bid me quit.

ESTHER : Nor me.

ADAH : Well, I'm fair flummoxed ! First, you
say . . .

ESTHER : And last, we're through with Windwhistle
to-night.

ADAH : By crikey, no ! I'll not be dragged around

The countryside to please you. Leave again

Without a penny-piece, when I have sweated

Myself fair sick to earn a bit of brass

To buy myself some decent duds with—nay,

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Not this time, Esther! If you're set on flitting,
 Nothing will turn you, I ken well enough:
 You've always been pig-headed: but you'll go,
 And leave me here.

ESTHER: I'll never leave you here:
 I've always taken care of you: I promised . . .

ADAH: You promised mother? Ay, I ken: but she
 Is in her grave: and I'm a bairn no longer.
 A deal too much you took on yourself—you promised,
 Promised for me! You've always taken care!
 You mammied me; and I was good to cuddle:
 You aye liked dollies; and I was your doll—
 Something to wash and dress, and slaver with kisses,
 And bribe with lollipops to do your bidding.
 But I'm a bairn no longer. If it's brats
 You're wanting, better wed and bear your own.
 I'm a grown woman; and I'll gan my gait,
 Without your leave.

ESTHER: Adah!

ADAH: Ay, Adah, Adah!
 You're not the only one that calls her "Adah":
 You're not her mistress now she's got a master.

ESTHER: You poor, poor lass: you little know what
 you say!

ADAH: I know. Because he happens to be wed,
 You think I should . . . But I ken what I'm after:
 I'm no man's slave: I've taught him that, already.

ESTHER: Adah, have you forgotten mother's life?

ADAH: Why should I not forget? She's in her grave,
 While I'm a breathing woman with my own life
 To live—ay, live! not toddle and tumble through,

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ADAH : I ken
 His wife's a fool : and fools must take fools' luck.
 If dolls get in my way, well, dolls are brittle.
 When there's a clash, it won't be Adah Burn
 Gets broken—nay, nor Angus Earnshaw, either.

ESTHER : Adah, you'd never give yourself to him ?
 You'd never throw yourself away ? You've heard . . .

ADAH : Tattle enough about the other wenches.

ESTHER : And still . . .

ADAH : I'll take my chance : I'm not afraid.

ESTHER : Then I must tell you, Addie . . .

ADAH : Not a word !

Nay, I'll not heed : I've listened all my life :
 It's my turn now for talking : and I ken
 'Twould suit somebody fine to keep me a bairn.

ESTHER : 'Twould suit . . .

ADAH : I ken you're jealous of me, Esther.

ESTHER : Jealous !

ADAH : Ay, Madam Mum, so prim and proper :
 I ken your sort. That's why we left the last place.
 You thought the master fancied me : and so
 We needs must quit. But I've no quarrel with you
 For that : I couldn't abide old ginger-whiskers,
 Myself ; though, if I'd had a liking for him,
 I'd have seen you straked, before I would have left.
 And Angus—ay, I've seen you look at him !
 No woman ever looked in a man's eyes
 Like that, unless . . . I wasn't born blind, Esther.
 Would you have knuckled down this afternoon
 At the bidding of any other man than him ?
 I didn't catch on then ; but now I twig.

I'd do the same myself : and, though you're jealous,
 I cannot blame you : we can't help ourselves :
 We're fated, Esther. When I first set eyes
 On Angus at the fair, I knew my master ;
 And fidgeted until I caught his eye :
 And, once he saw us there, the trick was done.
 He didn't shilly-shally : he knew his mind.
 Blame you ? If I thought you or anyone
 Stood in my way, I'd stick at nothing, woman :
 And I'd not leave here for ten thousand pounds ;
 Not if you begged me on your bended knees,
 And mother's ghost—nay, not if my own fetch
 Should stand before me now and give me warning.
 If you were lying on your deathbed, Esther,
 And begged me now, I couldn't.

ESTHER :

Not if I

Stood with the hangman's rope about my neck ?

ADAH : The hangman's rope ? You're mad ! He said
 you were—

Said he'd tamed madder mares than you. You're
 crazed

With jealousy. I'm sorry. I can't help it :
 We cannot help ourselves : we're never asked :
 And I don't know I want to be made different,
 Since Angus fancies . . . though it's hard on you.
 But one must suffer always : and you've had
 Your chance : we started equal ; but you let
 Him bully you : and now he thinks you're just
 Another Lucy. Still, if you'd been the one
 He'd fancied—but it won't bear dwelling on—
 I'd have stopped short of nothing.

So you can stand there, calmly looking down.
That's where the lovers leapt—a devilish drop!
And I could almost take the leap with you;
Though it would be a fearful ending, Esther,
To smash on the boulders.

ESTHER (*moaning*): Oh!

ANGUS: But you and I
Can stand together on the edge of danger,
Clear-headed—mates!

(*He moves towards ESTHER with outstretched arms.*)

ESTHER (*turning sharply*): You dare to touch me—
you!

ANGUS: Dare—and why not? I didn't come here,
my lass—

We didn't come here, I reckon, to spend the night
On the crag-top, a pair of standing-stones?

ESTHER: You came—I came: but only one of us
Will go alive from here.

ANGUS (*startled*): You mean . . . Nay, lass,
I'll hold you: and you shall not jump.

ESTHER: You dare
To lay a hand on me! Nay, I'll not jump,
And leave you living, to work your wicked will
On other women.

ANGUS: So it's I must leap:
And you're the one's to go alive from here?
You've settled it? I never knew your like:
You've got the nerve. By God! you make me
mad
To have you, and you know it: that's your game.

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ESTHER : You've not the courage to die of your own will.

ANGUS : Only the pluck to live. Do you suppose Any hen-harrier, once he's got his claws in, And settled down to glut himself, lets go, To try and wring his own neck in a tree-fork ? To die—when I have never lived till now !

ESTHER : You'll die : and I'm prepared to pay the price.

ANGUS : The price ? You'd murder me, and hang for it ?
You fancy I'd let you ? But you're jesting, lass ?

ESTHER : God knows which one will murder, which will hang.

ANGUS : So we're to fight it out, the two of us, Like haggards in mid-air ?—for you're no kestrel, Pouncing on grubs and shrews : it's heronshaws You fly at, Esther : and I like your spirit. You're game ; but I'd not lay a finger on you. Look, I'll stand here : and you can send me spinning.

(ANGUS poises himself on the very edge of the crag, with his back to the precipice.)

You daren't ? I thought not. You would do a murder, And pay the price ? An easy price for you : They seldom hang a woman nowadays, As well you know.

ESTHER : I didn't know. I meant To pay the price.

ANGUS : That's true : you're not the sort To want to kill a man, and then get off Scot-free ; but, whether or no, 'twould be manslaughter.

I kill a woman here—and it is murder :
 She kills me—and it's done in self-defence :
 That's justice, nowadays. But, come, my haggard,
 Enough of fighting. You know you never meant—
 And, if you did, I like you better for it.
 You're the first woman that's stood up to me.
 You're my true mate, and put me on my mettle :
 And now, by God, I'll tame you! Ay, you'll pay
 The price! I'm just stark crazy for . . .

(ANGUS makes a sudden swoop on ESTHER. She flings out an arm to ward him off, and catches him under the jawl. He reels back, hangs a moment on the edge, then topples over with a cry. ESTHER stands, as if turned to stone; then sinks to the ground with a shuddering moan, and sits, motionless, gazing across the fells with unseeing eyes. Presently, a figure is seen hurrying up the slope, and ADAH BURN appears, half-dressed, and with her hair streaming behind her. Seeing ESTHER crouching in the grass, she rushes up to her, and seizes her roughly by the arm.)

ADAH: You're here, alone? I thought I heard . . .

My God!

You not alone—say that you're not alone?

I wakened in the night, to find you gone—

And then I saw it all as plain as day:

It shivered through me like a flash of wildfire—

Your words . . . You said . . . My God! why
 didn't I see

The murder in your eyes, when you were talking,
 So that I might have saved . . . Oh, woman, say—
 Say you've not murdered . . . Say he never came!
 You tempted him, that you might murder him—
 But he's not come yet; and I'm still in time?

ESTHER: He's lying at the crag-foot.

ADAH: And you killed him?
 I might have known—you, with your icy eyes,
 And your cold-blooded jealousy. You fiend!
 To stand there, jesting of the hangman's rope—
 And all the while you meant . . . but you shall hang:
 You'll not escape: I'd drag you to the gallows—
 Murderess, murderess! Ay, I'll cry it out
 To all the world! To do it in cold blood!
 Hot-blooded killing I could understand:
 I've half a mind, myself, to . . . And to think
 An adder such as you could do to death
 A man like Angus! There never was a man
 Like him: and now he's broken. Pity me:
 Tell me I'm dreaming, Esther: waken me.
 It's just a nightmare: take me in your arms,
 And wake me with a kiss, and comfort me.

ESTHER (*in a low voice*): Addie!

ADAH: You fiend! Don't touch me! And to
 think

You were my sister—and now! Oh, Angus, Angus!

(*She sinks to the ground in a half-swoon, and lies moaning. ESTHER does not stir. Another figure appears, climbing the slope, and LUCY EARNSHAW toils up, panting, and sees ADAH.*)

LUCY: I guessed as much. I heard the backdoor-sneek,

For all your stealthy tricks. I've never slept

A wink this blessed night on my lone bed:

And when I heard the door, I sat upright

In time to see you, sneaking through the yard.

Then I was sure. It's more than flesh and blood

Can bear. (*Catching sight of ESTHER*) My sakes! Two wenches! Where's my husband?

ADAH: Your husband, woman? I ken naught of him:

I only know my man lies at the crag-foot.

LUCY: Your man?

ADAH: Ay, Angus.

LUCY: Yours!

ADAH: All mine, all mine—

And Esther's murdered him.

LUCY: What, Angus dead!

ADAH: Dead—dead: and she shall hang.

LUCY: I'll not believe

That any wench could murder such a man.

She tempted him—God knows, I ken too well

He needed little tempting: and he slipped

On the crag's edge—he always was foolhardy:

And now she wants to say she murdered him

To save her virtue, and so get sympathy.

But I shall tell the truth out: she shan't brag,

The slut, she's done away with such as him—

The like of Angus, murdered by a doxy!

Ay, but the world shall learn the truth: I'll have

My husband righted!

(As she speaks, RACHEL EARNSHAW, who has been toiling up the slope unobserved, approaches ; and catches the last words.)

RACHEL: Spoken like a wife!
 But, has the world gone watty, that you stand,
 Screeching on crag-tops to the moon at midnight
 Like witches, you and your wenches? When I waked,
 I felt the house was empty : and so I rose,
 And went from room to room : and only Alec
 Was sleeping sound : and then I saw folk running—
 Two light-heels running it like hare and hounds
 Across the fell : and, being a sport, I followed.
 And so, there's three here? I saw only two.
 Where's Angus? He's a night-bird : and I fancied . . .
 But, happen, three . . .

ADAH: He's lying at the crag-foot :
 And Esther's . . .

RACHEL: Killed him? Never say she's killed him?
 She had the pluck? I never had the pluck . . .
 I mind now, she said "bloodshed" : but I fancied
 She was just seeing red : I little dreamt . . .
 In his hot lust she killed him—in his pride,
 Rejoicing like a lion in his strength!
 I never had the courage—though I've loathed
 Men's ways with women . . . killed him ; and sits there,
 Proud as a queen in some old Bible-story.
 Esther, say you? Nay, Judith in the tent . . .

ADAH: She is a murderess : and she'll hang.

RACHEL Shame, wench!
 (To ESTHER): You've done a bloody deed : and you
 must suffer,

For pipes and timbrels have gone out of fashion :
 You've killed my son ; and I should curse you for
 it—

But, well, you've got to live, so where's the need
 For cursing ? And he's dead, past cure of curses.
 And who am I to blame you, when I've gripped,
 Ay, many times, the knife-haft in my neave,
 Myself?—though I'd not pluck to put an end to . . .
 And now, father and son ! And only Alec,
 Slumbering in his bed—the bed he'll die in
 Easily : no wild stirk or mankeen heifer,
 Seeing red, will cut off Alec in his prime :
 He'll see his children's children at Windwhistle.
 The world was made for slow-wits ; and their seed
 Inheriteth the earth. And Angus lies,
 Dashed to destruction by the fire of life
 That blazed within him, only to destroy him. . . .
 And once, I'd weep, if he but cut a finger !
 But you, whose hand . . . there's no escape for you :
 They'll never string you up : they seldom hang
 A woman nowadays.

ESTHER (*starting up*) : Ay, he said that.

RACHEL : He said that, did he ?

ESTHER : I'd forgotten that.

(ESTHER *runs to the edge of the crag and peers over.*)

RACHEL : Hold her—she'll fall !

ADAH : Not she : she's peeping down,
 And gloating over him.

(ESTHER *draws herself to her full height ; stands rigid for a moment ; and then plunges over*

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the precipice. The three women stand gazing at the spot, spell-bound.)

RACHEL: Escaped! Escaped!
She's had the pluck to gan her own gait—ay!
(*Turning to ADAH*) You fool, she's done you!

ADAH (*sinking in a heap with a wail*): Ay, she's gone to him.

RACHEL: Both broken—and they might have been such mates,
And bred such bairns, if they'd not met too late.
The waste of it!

LUCY (*in a dazed voice*): She stood right up, and leapt . . .

RACHEL: Proud as a queen.

LUCY: She stood right up, and leapt . . .
But I'll not have it said, she murdered him,
And then took her own time, and killed herself.
That was no ending for a man like him.

RACHEL: You'd make a story—say they leapt together?

LUCY: 'Twould be more like my Angus.

RACHEL: Sure enough,
'Twould make a pretty tale, the Lovers' Leap!

GANGRELS

RED ROWAN

PERSONS

WEAZEL, *an old horse-coper.*

SLIM JIM }
HAREHEELS } *young horse-copers.*

RED ROWAN, *an old woman.*

BLACKADDER }
NETTLE } *young women.*

ALBERT EDWARD HIGGS }
(*of London*) } *a tramp.*

RED ROWAN

SCENE: *A horse-coper's camp near Yetholm, on the Border. It is a fine evening in late September, and WEAZEL, SLIM JIM, HAREHEELS, BLACKADDER and NETTLE lie about the fire on which their supper is cooking in a pot slung from a forked stake. To the left, at the back, is a muggers' cart, seen end on, with an arched canvas tilt. RED ROWAN stands near it, looking down on the company round the fire.*

RED ROWAN (to BLACKADDER): You, telling fortunes,
you—a chit like you,
Sneaking my customers with your saucy eyes
And fleeching flum! A deal you ken of fortunes—
Cheating the gonerels with your jookery-pawkry!
You should think shame, to rook them of their
earnings.

BLACKADDER: Well, I could tell your fortune, anyhow,
And free of charge.

RED ROWAN: My fortune!

BLACKADDER: Ay, no need
To rob your stocking to cross my palm.

RED ROWAN: You dare!
No one has ever told Red Rowan's fortune.
What's the world coming to! Why in my day . . .

BLACKADDER: Your day? The day before the flood
I take it?

The world's been washed since then.

RED ROWAN: You jezebel!
I'll teach you . . .

BLACKADDER: Ay, and time to take to teaching.
When you're past the doing.

RED ROWAN: Past . . . But I ken too
well

Who 'tis encourages you—the poor old doobby,
Sporting the gaudy neckerchiefs you buy him
With the brass you've cheated me out of: rooking
pigeons,

To peacock Weazel into a holy-bizen
With red and yellow chokers, when it's time
He should be wearing black for his own funeral!

WEAZEL: You mind your business.

RED ROWAN: And it's not my business
When a young slut buys fairings for my man?
In my day . . .

WEAZEL: Your day's over.

RED ROWAN: Ay—and yours?

WEAZEL: A man's day's never over till he's straked.

RED ROWAN: While a fresh petticoat, you mean . . .

WEAZEL: Just so.

NETTLE: Naught left for you now, Grannie, but
saying prayers.

HAREHEELS: And so Blackadder bought that kerchief,
did she?

BLACKADDER: She did: let's hear what you've to say
about it.

RED ROWAN: Ay, Hareheels, my fine lurcher, you're cut out

By that old dog. Your doxy . . .

HAREHEELS: Hold your jaw,
You randy! You look after your own man;
And I'll . . .

BLACKADDER: You'll?

NETTLE: Nay, but Hareheels mustn't quarrel
With Weazel's leavings, when it's all he'll get.

SLIM JIM: A bare shank-bone!

NETTLE: Ay, Grannie fares the best:
She's got a braw young fancy-man. Those two . . .

SLIM JIM: A cuckoo, mated to a carrion-crow!

HAREHEELS: I'd see the hag to hell . . .

WEAZEL: Now, no bad language.
A little pleasant chaff among old friends
Is well enough, and helps to pass the time:
But I won't let a lady be insulted:
And, Hareheels, lad, you should respect grey hairs.

RED ROWAN: Grey hairs!

WEAZEL: Ay, lass, the flame's gone out of yours—
Red-rowan turned to old-man's-beard.

RED ROWAN: Old man's!

WEAZEL: A bonnie flare it was, when you were
young:
I've never known a fierier poll: but ashes
Are the end of every camp-fire; and the blithest
Burns out the quickest.

RED ROWAN: Ay, yet you may find
A spark still smoulders, hot beneath the ash.
Old man's! And you're a nice young man to talk,

With a pow like a dandelion-clock, half-blown :
And who'll respect grey hairs, when an old man lets
Himself be made a fool of by a slut
With a poll like a tar-brush ?

WEAZEL : Dandelion-clocks

Whiles take the fancy of wenches—" This day, some-
day . . . "

RED ROWAN : Ay, till they've puffed them bald :
and you forget

How the game ends : it's " This day, someday—never ! "

WEAZEL : I'll take my chance. When the old fire's
burnt out,

It's time to strike the camp : rain-puddled ash
Won't warm an old man's bones.

RED ROWAN : You'll let that trollop

Make a mommet of you ?

BLACKADDER : Leave me out of it,

The two of you, if you must vent your minds

In radgy slack. I'll not be parcelled out

To any man. If I've a turn for Hareheels,

He'll serve my turn : and, if I fancy Weazel,

He'll be my fancy-man : so, there's an end.

SLIM JIM : How about little Jim ?

NETTLE : You dare to monkey . . .

BLACKADDER : End, did I say ? 'There'll never be an
end

While there's a man can striddle a horse.

NETTLE : You dare

To monkey with Jim !

BLACKADDER : I'll leave Slim Jim to you.

He's got what he deserves : and I'd not rob you

Of your one chance. You and Red Rowan fancy
 There are no other men in the world for me
 Than Weazel, Hareheels and Slim Jim. Who knows
 What callant may be galloping even now
 To swing me to his saddle?

RED ROWAN (*to* WEAZEL): You hear the baggage?
 You'll let . . .

BLACKADDER: He'll let? You'll let? Your reign is
 done:

You've queened it long enough: I'm mistress now:
 And don't you dare to turn your tongue on me—
 Nay, nor your eyes: you cannot play the witch
 On me: my eye's a match for any eye.
 I'm nothing daunted by an old wife's glower;
 So, save your evil eye for scaring bairns,
 And screwing sixpences from nowts in trousers.

RED ROWAN: A sump of puddled ash! Yet, in my
 day . . .

Hark, jezebel: your fire is bonnie enough;
 But you'll burn out someday: and then you'll find
 What men are.

BLACKADDER: Happen: but while I burn, I'll burn:
 And men may find they're only faggots to feed
 My fire.

RED ROWAN: Ay, ay; and so I thought at your age.
 My eye was once as bright, my breasts as full . . .

BLACKADDER: And as for women . . . Oh, but you
 have ridden

Us wenches hard, and lashed us with your tongue:
 But I'm in the saddle now—your turn to smart!
 I've slutted for you long: but I'm no bairn now

For you to bray half-silly with your neave.

WEAZEL : Who bangs the bairn must aye look out
for bangs

When the hempy's old enough to handle the broom-
stick.

BLACKADDER : When you've an arm like mine, old
spindleshanks,

Then you can make me do your bidding : now
You'll slut for me : and as for Weazel . . .

WEAZEL : Ay,
Blackadder is the filly for my money.

RED ROWAN : Well, if you're set on breaking your
old neck

Riding Black Beauty to the devil, no use
For me to waste my wind. I'd better leave you
To manage her yourself ; and wish you joy.
I'll just turn in, for I've no mind to clarty
My manners, swapping compliments with such
A muckhut.

BLACKADDER : So ?

SLIM JIM : The queen is dead : long live . . .

HAREHEELS : I'm blasted if I'll . . .

WEAZEL : Not a doubt of it :
But keep it to yourself, unless you want
To hoof it. Let Blackadder tip the wink
She doesn't like your language ; and you'll scoot.

RED ROWAN : The poor, blind dobbie !

NETTLE : Well, anyway, he's master ;
Though we've got a brand-new mistress, seemingly :
But she needn't think she's going to boss . . .

WEAZEL : You'll do

Blackadder's bidding.

NETTLE: I'll . . .

WEAZEL: You'll take your hook—
You and Hareheels, if I've another word
From either.

RED ROWAN: Kiss the dust, the pair of you ;
And let her trample . . .

SLIM JIM: Time, grannie, you were creeping
Into your lonesome bed : and don't forget
To say your prayers.

RED ROWAN: I'll save my breath : you're all
Past praying for.

SLIM JIM: Good-night, and sweet repose,
And it's all the bed to-night, and all the clothes !

WEAZEL: You young folk are too hard. A little
chaff

Hurts no one, but . . .

(WEAZEL breaks off, with a shake of the head, as
RED ROWAN climbs into the cart, and dis-
appears behind the curtain of the tilt. A
moment after ALBERT EDWARD HIGGS, a
podgy tramp, enters stealthily behind the
company round the fire, unnoticed. He
stands eyeing the group, and looking round
the camp : then, snuffing the fumes from the
pot with relish, he speaks, as if to himself, in
a soft, wheezy voice.)

ALBERT EDWARD: And such a lovely mare !

(They all turn their heads to look up at him : but he
still stands with rapt eyes, as if contemplat-
ing something at a distance. His back is to

the cart. Presently, a corner of the tilt is lifted; and RED ROWAN peers out at the unconscious tramp.)

WEAZEL: Hullo! What's this?

NETTLE: Blackadder, here's your callant
Come galloping to you on Shanks's mare.

WEAZEL: Ay, that's about the only nag, I'd wager,
He's any knowledge of.

ALBERT EDWARD: These blinking eyes
Never saw the like of her.

NETTLE: Blackadder?

ALBERT EDWARD: Style!
And, as for action—talk of Rotten Row!

WEAZEL: What's the old geezer gabbing about?

ALBERT EDWARD: A spanker!
The king's coach-horses aren't in it.

WEAZEL: Squat, old sport;
And let us know what maggot's worrying you.

ALBERT EDWARD: Such form—such elegance! And
to be had
Just for the slipping of a knot.

WEAZEL (*starting to his feet*): What's that?
Speak up, old gent.

(The others rise quietly, and cluster about the tramp.)

ALBERT EDWARD: To think she might be mine,
If only I had been a younger man,
And not so portly, not so like my namesake—
The Albert Edwards seem to run to fat,
Although my mother was no Queen Victoria,
No feather-bed . . .

WEAZEL: But where's the bonnie mare?

ALBERT EDWARD: Tied to a post outside . . . O
vanished youth!

To think because a few short years have combed
My golden curls out, and destroyed my figure,
I must lose such a prize! The price she'd fetch
At Tattersall's!

WEAZEL: Why can't you speak out plain,
And tell . . .

ALBERT EDWARD: And all because of gout and
asthma!

Genteel complaints, and in the family—
My father was a martyr . . .

WEAZEL: Devil take

Your father and you, if you . . .

ALBERT EDWARD: Oh, my poor breath!
And her sot of a master, lying like a log,
Blind-drunk and helpless.

HAREHEELS: Look here, old broken bellows,
If you don't tell us, and sharp . . .

ALBERT EDWARD: You fluster me,
The lot of you. I might be an accident,
The way you all keep crowding round and shoving.
Move further off; and let me get my breath.
How can I tell . . . But it's not only my bellows
That's broken, but my heart, to think of her
Left with that drunken brute.

BLACKADDER: Come, stow that gammon,
Or something else of yours will soon be broken.

ALBERT EDWARD: Lady, you understand? A woman's
heart . . .

BLACKADDER: A woman's hand will take you by the neck,

And snap it like a kex, if you don't tell us
Where 'twas you saw the mare. Come, jerk it out!

ALBERT EDWARD: It's been a weakness with me all my life:

I don't regret it, but I never could
Refuse a lady. Such a pair of eyes—
Black diamonds!

BLACKADDER: You leave my eyes alone.

ALBERT EDWARD: My mother had black eyes. I've always had

A tender spot . . .

SLIM JIM: You'll have a tenderer spot,
And black eyes like your mother, into the bargain,
If you don't tell us . . .

ALBERT EDWARD: Who's addressing you?
I'm talking with this lady. Can't we have
A little tête-à-tête, but you barge in
With your coarse notions?

BLACKADDER (*seizing ALBERT EDWARD by the collar*):
Gox, I'll tatertate you!

Just spit it out, or I'll . . .

ALBERT EDWARD: Oh, my poor breath!
Such sudden affection at my time of life
Is more than I . . . Restrain yourself, my dear.

BLACKADDER: You windywallops! I'll twist your . . .

ALBERT EDWARD: Patience, patience!
If there's one fault the gentle sex has . . . Ow!
You're choking me, my love!

BLACKADDER: I'll throttle you.

Where is that mare?

ALBERT EDWARD (*gasping*): Outside *The Travellers' Rest*.

(BLACKADDER releases him, and WEAZEL and SLIM JIM begin to move off down the road.)

ALBERT EDWARD: Now I can breathe. But where are you two off to?

WEAZEL (*stopping and turning*): To fetch the mare for you.

ALBERT EDWARD: Now that's real kind—Christian, I call it. It's not every day I come across real gentlemen—going off, Without a word, to do a kindly deed. But do you think two'll manage? Hadn't someone Better drop in to have a drink, and keep The landlord busy, while the other two . . . Though doubtless, you know best, I'll just sit down, And get my wind to entertain the ladies While you're away. My poor heart's palpitating. A hug like that at my age! I'm not used . . . Though I can't blame the wench: she's not the first That's cottoned up to Albert Edward Higgs. So, I'll just take things easy, till you bring My mare for me.

(*The tramp sits down by the fire with his back to the cart, still unconscious of RED ROWAN'S eye watching him.*)

WEAZEL (*to HAREHEELS, who makes as if to accompany them*): You needn't come: we'll manage.

HAREHEELS: You fancy I'd trust you two!

BLACKADDER: I'm coming as well. I couldn't trust that mare with any man.

NETTLE : If she's to go, I'll not be left behind—
Though it's not the mare I cannot trust with men.

WEAZEL : Now, have some sense. It's just a one-
horse-show :

And when I go to view a mare, I'm not
For travelling with a gairishon. You'll give
The game away, among you—such a gang :
And, anyway, we can't all go and leave . . .

ALBERT EDWARD : Don't worry about me : you needn't
stand

On ceremony with me. I'm not the sort
Easily takes offence : and I'll just snooze.

BLACKADDER : He's safe enough, the wheezy saveloy !
I could settle him, single-handed. He'll not bolt.

WEAZEL (*catching sight of RED ROWAN'S eye peering
from under the tilt*) : He'd better not try it on, if
I'm a judge.

But such a gang ! Though you two wenchies might
Be cracking with the company in the bar,
While we . . .

ALBERT EDWARD : The very thing ! Who'd have a
thought

For mares, while two such charmers . . . It's my loss :
But I must try and bear up while you're away :
And keep an eye on things.

WEAZEL : Only an eye.
If you lay as much as a finger on the gear,
You'll not be portly when we've done with you.

*(They steal out in single file, leaving the tramp
stretched out by the fire with his eyes closed.
When they are well out of hearing, he sits*

up, and winks : then rises briskly and looks cautiously round. By the time his eyes reach the cart, RED ROWAN has dropped the curtain of the tilt, and disappeared from sight.)

ALBERT EDWARD : What ho ! The coast is clear, and all serene !

To it, my hearties ! Once aboard the lugger . . .
 A mile and a half, at least, to *The Travellers' Rest*.
 I'll just have time for a snack, and a look about me
 To see if there's aught worth picking up—not much
 Of a Tommy Tiddler's ground, by the looks of it :
 But you never know what you'll find in a coper's cart :
 They've a knack of raking in queer odds and ends,
 Knocking about the country. I've been surprised
 Before to-day. I may have struck it lucky.

(He picks up a plate and spoon from the ground, and helps himself to stew from the pot. As he does so, with his back to the cart, RED ROWAN unhooks the canvas curtain of the tilt, which drops down silently : then sits, motionless, under the dark arch, like an alabaster idol, her grizzled hair on her shoulders, and her eyes fixed on the tramp's back.)

ALBERT EDWARD : Hare, by the sniff of it : I've always had

A weakness for jugged hare. Damn it, it's hot !
 Well, I'll just set it down to cool a bit,
 While I look round. Ow ! but I've got the shivers ;
 And there's cold water trickling down my spine :
 I must have caught a chill—these frosty nights . . .
 Now for the lugger, to see . . .

(Turning his head, he catches sight of RED ROWAN. She does not stir or speak; but sits with eyes fixed on him.)

ALBERT EDWARD: What ho, she bumps!
(Recovering himself.) Your pardon, lady—I thought I was alone.

I'm the new cook, just tasting the stew to see . . .
Another pinch of salt, or half a pinch,
If you would kindly hand me out the saltbox:
And a dash of pepper wouldn't come amiss.
But, blimey, am I talking to a lady,
Or Cleopatra's mummy? It's a waxwork,
For sure: no lady could have held her tongue
So long. I'm always sorry for wax ladies
In shows, or smirking in the barbers' windows—
And they, without a tongue to wag. But, lordy,
To think I should be scared by two glass eyes!
I once glanced over my shoulder, and saw an owl
Glaring down on me just so—I don't like owls,
Their eyes, or voices: I've heard too much of them
These last few nights: it gets into your blood
And curdles it, that screeching—and when the eyes
Moved . . . Higgs, your nerves aren't what they were,
my boy:
It's time you lay up in your winter-quarters:
These hills and foggy nights. . . . Why, you'll be
seeing
Ghosts, and mistaking owls for witches next,
If you can't look a waxwork in the eyes.
(RED ROWAN moves her eyes slowly round. The
tramp starts.)

Jerusalem! (*Recovering.*) Not bad for a travelling
show . . .

Yet, who the devil dropt the curtain down?

I could have sworn, when I looked round just now,
There was no blinking image.

RED ROWAN: Who are you calling
A blinking image?

ALBERT EDWARD: Bust me, if it isn't
Madam Tussaud herself! Your pardon, madam,
But I mistook you . . .

RED ROWAN (*twisting up her hair*): So, you'd have
a snack:

Then see what you could pick up in the cart?
Queer odds and ends in copers' carts? You've struck
Your lucky!

ALBERT EDWARD: Jestin', jestin'!

RED ROWAN: Once aboard . . .

ALBERT EDWARD: Only a favourite wheeze—you
know it? "Once

Aboard the lugger, and the girl is mine!"

RED ROWAN (*climbing down from the cart*): She is.

ALBERT EDWARD (*stepping back*): She is?

RED ROWAN: The girl is yours.

ALBERT EDWARD: O lordy!

You never thought I meant. . . . It's just a saying—

Gammon, you know. I've always had a turn

For poetry; and everybody knows

It's all-my-eye-and-Betty-Martin.

RED ROWAN: Nay:

Nothing I ken of Betty: but I ken

When you leave here, I'm going with you.

ALBERT EDWARD : Blimey !
 You never mean . . .

RED ROWAN : I mean just what I'm saying.

ALBERT EDWARD : You wouldn't quit . . .

RED ROWAN : I'm going to be a quitter,
 Before I'm quitted.

ALBERT EDWARD : I see—been having words ?
 Was it with young black-eyes ?

RED ROWAN : The jezebel !
 She, telling fortunes ; and buying neckerchiefs
 For men who are old enough to be her granddad !

ALBERT EDWARD : Plainer and plainer ! Love and
 Jealousy,

May and December, or The Old Man's Darling :
 A Drama of High Life, in penny numbers ?

RED ROWAN : Me—jealous of thon jezebel !

ALBERT EDWARD : Come, come,
 Old lady, don't take on so.

RED ROWAN : Who are you calling
 Old lady ? You're no two-year-old, yourself.
 Old lady, indeed !

ALBERT EDWARD : A slip ! But what are words ?
 Just wind ; and soon blow over. You and black-
 eyes

Will make it up ; and you'll be bosom-friends
 Before you know.

RED ROWAN : Ay, it will need to be
 Before I know. Where are you bound for, Stumpy ?

ALBERT EDWARD : My winter-quarters : I can't stand
 the North

In winter : it's too chilly, and too creepy.

We winter in the South: I'm the last swallow—

The last rose of summer left blooming alone . . .

RED ROWAN: . . . And where . . .

ALBERT EDWARD: My lovely companions all faded . . .

RED ROWAN: . . . Where may be . . .

ALBERT EDWARD: My winter-quarters? Why, in
London, of course—

Whitechapel way: my Park Lane house is let

For the season to Ikey . . .

RED ROWAN: . . . London?

ALBERT EDWARD: . . . Where ever else

Could any gentleman winter?

RED ROWAN: . . . That will do:

I've always had a fancy to live in London.

We may as well be stepping.

ALBERT EDWARD: . . . You're not serious?

You're gammoning—just kidding me? You can't

Pull Albert Edward's leg, or Higgs's either.

You never mean . . .

RED ROWAN: . . . Where you go, I go too.

ALBERT EDWARD: Well, I'll be hanged!

RED ROWAN: . . . Likely; but I'll not promise

To follow you further than the gallows' foot:

But short of that, you'll not escape . . .

ALBERT EDWARD: . . . You fancy

I'd saddle myself with a hag?

RED ROWAN (*eyeing him with a smile*): A what?

ALBERT EDWARD: . . . Blue murder!

Don't look at me like that—those eyes . . .

RED ROWAN: . . . A what?

ALBERT EDWARD: Pardon, a slip!

RED ROWAN: I've known a slip like that
Wrench a man's ankle, and shoot pains through him
Till the flesh shredded off his burning bones.

ALBERT EDWARD: I say, old lady, you know my
heart's not strong:
And I can't stand those eyes of yours: they make
My flesh creep: there's a crawling in my bones . . .

RED ROWAN: Cold maggots in your marrow? Now
you know
Red Rowan means all that Red Rowan says.

ALBERT EDWARD (*backing away*): Take you with
me? - I'd sooner take a ghost.
Now, no offence—but I'm not overstrong.
You're an old dear, of course: but all the same,
There's something not quite nice about your eyes—
And as for conversation! No, I couldn't!
I'm sorry: but it's *au revoir*! I'm off.

RED ROWAN: Without the mare?

ALBERT EDWARD: I'm leaving her to you—
A souvenir: that's French for compensation—
A little plaister for a broken heart:
And such a mare! There never was a mare . . .

RED ROWAN: That's so: a wild-goose chase you've
sent them on.

ALBERT EDWARD: Upon my soul . . . but you're
too cute for me:
You know a thing or two, I see, Old Bean:
But anyhow, if they don't find the mare,
They cannot miss her nest.

RED ROWAN: And what do you fancy
They'll do, when they come back and find . . .

For hanging, there'd be nothing left to hang.

ALBERT EDWARD : Stop it, old lady !

RED ROWAN : Don't old lady me !
 But I'll not let you hide yourself in gaol
 Till Weazel's wrung your neck, and Slim Jim's
 jabbed
 Your jaw, and Hareheels clog-danced on your
 chest,
 Scrunching your ribs like faggots—crackle, crackle :
 Ay, and Blackadder . . .

ALBERT EDWARD : Mercy ! Draw it mild !

RED ROWAN : Mild, did you say ? That's only
 mother's milk

To what I'll make you swallow. I could blister
 Your thrapple with a dose . . .

ALBERT EDWARD . I've had enough :
 I've never been a soaker—always known
 The time to stop : and I meant no offence.

RED ROWAN : Nor I : but I am going to travel with
 you.

I won't bide here, and let thon jezebel
 Badger and bullyrag me all day long.
 And Weazel, he would leave me in the ditch
 To die, as like as not—and he, new-fangled
 With every fresh red flannel-petticoat
 Catches his eye ! And winter coming on.
 The frosts go through my bones now like cold
 needles,
 Turning the marrow to ice : and I've a notion
 To winter betwixt four walls. I'm getting on—
 Too old for the road, it seems. I never fancied

The fire'd burn out to ashes. Let him mind
 He doesn't scorch his fingers with his new flame—
 The black-eyed jezebel! I'm sick to death
 Of the whole gangrel crew.

*(The tramp has stolen behind her, and tries to
 sidle off, unnoticed.)*

You'd sneak away
 Without me, would you? But my eye is on you,
 Although I've got my back to you.

ALBERT EDWARD (*stopping*): No, no—
 I only meant . . . I wouldn't dream of going
 Without you.

RED ROWAN: Nay, you'll never dream again
 Without my knowing all that's in your mind,
 My bonnie birkie. When you sleep, my eye
 Will burrow, a red maggot, in your brain,
 Eating your thoughts up—ay, and starving on them.
 But come, we'd best be making ourselves scarce,
 Before they're back, unless you'd rather wait?

ALBERT EDWARD: Well, if it's a choice between . . .

RED ROWAN: No choice for you:
 Though you'd scarce be worth the taking, when they'd
 finished.

Poor company, a rackle of broken bones!
 Weazel will miss me.

ALBERT EDWARD: Miss you! ay, who wouldn't?

RED ROWAN: You're coming, Stumpy? Well, we'd
 best step out.

ALBERT EDWARD: Ay, if it must be "we": but isn't
 there

A dowry with the lady—a spoon or so?

A little property won't come amiss. (*Looking round.*)
Now in that cart?

RED ROWAN: Haven't you had enough
Out of the cart? You said, you'd been surprised
Before to-day.

ALBERT EDWARD: Never! And, what is more,
I'll never be surprised again in this life.

RED ROWAN: You can't be sure, until I've done with
you.

We're just beginning life together: I've still
A trick or two up my sleeve might startle you.
But we'll not take a spoon with us: if we did,
They'd follow us, for certain.

ALBERT EDWARD: Right you are.

RED ROWAN: You're learning sense: and right I'll
be for you

Until you're snug between the coffin-boards:
And even then, you'll not escape my eye—
A red-hot gimlet, worming through the deal.

ALBERT EDWARD: Oh, don't start that again: it
isn't nice—

And me with chronic asthma, and a heart.

RED ROWAN: Your asthma and my rheumatics
should keep pace,
And jog along together cannily.

ALBERT EDWARD: Albert, you're hooked: Edward,
you're hooked: and Higgs,
You're hooked and landed. Well, jump up, old
girl,
Behind me on the mare.

RED ROWAN: The mare?

ALBERT EDWARD (*starting off*): Ay, Shanks's.
There never was a lovelier mare—such action,
Such elegance!

RED ROWAN (*following*): I little dreamt I'd come
To hoof it with a gaberlunzie-man!

BLACKADDER

PERSONS

HAREHEELS }
SLIM JIM } *horse-copers.*

BLACKADDER.

NETTLE.

JACK BENSON, *a disabled soldier.*

BLACKADDER

SCENE: *A horse-copers' camp by a Border-stream, on a fine Spring morning. The camp fire is dying out: and the muggers' cart, with its canvas tilt, is packed for travelling. HAREHEELS and SLIM JIM are polishing harness: and BLACKADDER is washing breakfast-dishes in the stream. NETTLE, with a shawl over her head and carrying a large market-basket over her arm, comes from behind the cart; and, shuffling towards BLACKADDER, stands looking down on her sullenly.*

BLACKADDER (*looking up*): Well?

NETTLE: Don't you dare say "well" to me like that.

BLACKADDER: Like what?

NETTLE: Like what—I'll let you see like what. I'll teach you I'm not clarts beneath your clogs.

BLACKADDER: What's wrong?

NETTLE: What's wrong? You well may ask what's wrong:

You'll soon find out; and I can tell you this much
To keep you going—you may as tite know now:
This is the last time I'll run errands for you.

BLACKADDER: For me?

NETTLE :

Ay,

Now Weazel's buried, Hareheels has a mind
To take you back : and he's the master now.

BLACKADDER : You've settled it ?

NETTLE : Not I : I'm not the sort

To settle things for men : I'd never snatch
The reins from menfolk's hands : but one thing's
certain—

We're none of us, from this on, going to do
The bidding of a petticoat.

BLACKADDER : I see.

NETTLE : Hareheels and Jim . . .

BLACKADDER : The three of you have put

Your noddles together, trying to make one head ?

(*Calling*) Hareheels !

(HAREHEELS *goes on polishing without taking
any notice.*)

NETTLE (*to HAREHEELS*): Now don't you hear her
majesty ?

Jump to it, lad !

HAREHEELS : I'll come when I've a mind to.

BLACKADDER : Hareheels, it's time you took the mare
to get

That hind shoe seen to.

HAREHEELS (*rising and slouching forward*): Who are
you ordering ?

BLACKADDER : You'll soon find out.

HAREHEELS : Not I, my lass : it's you

Will do the finding out. I'm master now,
As Nettle says ; and I'll not let my doxy
Be bossing me. By gox, I've stood enough

From you and Weazel—that old devil, sneaking
 My woman from me! He hooked it just in time
 To save his thrapple, the varmint: I'd have slit
 The weasands of the pair of you, I would,
 If I'd to swing for it. You give a squint
 At any other man; and I'll . . .

BLACKADDER: Ay, ay,
 You're the braw cock-a-ride-a-roosie, now
 That Weazel's dead.

HAREHEELS: Well, anyway, no hen
 Shall rule the roost: as Nettle says . . .

BLACKADDER: As Nettle?
 Seemingly, you've been listening to hen's cackle?
 And so it's Nettle that's to rule the roost?
 You'd better mate with her, my cockmadendy:
 Dare say Slim Jim won't mind.

NETTLE: You . . . but Slim
 Jim
 Will talk to you himself. I ken my place:
 I'm no loose-petticoat: but such as you
 Don't understand a decent woman's feelings.

BLACKADDER: Slim Jim will talk? So, he's to have
 a chance
 At last? Yet, he seems shy: happen, he's lost
 The use of his tongue: he's had to keep it quiet
 So long, poor dummy!

NETTLE: You hear her?

SLIM JIM: Ay, I hear:
 But I'll just leave you two to settle with her.

NETTLE: You call yourself a man! Just wait
 till I . . .

BLACKADDER: It seems that Slim Jim kens his place :
he's wise.

SLIM JIM: Nay, but I'm with them: and no petti-
coat . . .

BLACKADDER: Well, you've both got your lesson off
pat, good boys!

No petticoat? You've given up your trousers
To Nettle, you and Hareheels? Well, she's welcome
To the brace of you: it leaves me free.

NETTLE: You slut—
You radgy slut!

HAREHEELS: Nay, leave the wench to me.
I'll break her yet: I'll take my way with her.
She'll learn that she's a woman—I'm a man.
Free! She'll soon find out what her freedom's worth,
If she tries on her tricks!

BLACKADDER (*regarding him steadily*): You take the
mare.

NETTLE: You'll do her bidding, Hareheels?

HAREHEELS (*turning*): Well, that shoe
Wants seeing to: I may as tite . . .

BLACKADDER: And you
Be off, before . . .

NETTLE (*moving*): I'd scorn to stay and talk
With such . . . but it's the last time, mind you.

BLACKADDER: Happen.
But where is Slim Jim off to?

NETTLE: What's that to you?
And mayn't I take my man to carry my basket
Without your leave? Likely, I'd trust you two
Alone together.

BLACKADDER : Well, put a jerk in it,
The lot of you, if we're to start to-day.

(HAREHEELS goes down the road to the right,
leading the mare : and NETTLE and SLIM
JIM follow. BLACKADDER stands, looking
after them and biting her lips.)

BLACKADDER : So, that's their little game.

(BLACKADDER bends down to the stream to finish
her dish-washing. Presently JACK BENSON
hobbles down the road from the left. He is a
tall slender lad on crutches with only one leg ;
and looks half-starved and ill. He stops as
BLACKADDER looks up.)

JACK : Good-morning, mistress.

BLACKADDER : Good-morning.

JACK : Well, it's something, anyway,
To have a lady wishing me good-morning—
If wishes would cram the belly and warm the bones . . .

BLACKADDER : You're hungry ? Well, there's still a
sup of tea
Left in the can : I'll heat it up for you.
You just sit down, while I make up the fire.
And there's some bread and cheese. You're shivering ?
It's not that cold.

JACK : Happen not, by the fire ;
But it might have been an iceberg, not a haystack,
I sat and shivered under all night long.
You're looking for my leg ? You'll have to look
A little further, mistress, if you'd find it.
It's somewhere on the veldt—that's Africa.

BLACKADDER : You've been in Africa ?

BLACKADDER : You've been to Africa—you've seen the world ?

JACK : I've seen the world—ay, more than enough of it :

And as for Africa . . .

BLACKADDER : You've crossed the sea ?

JACK : Ay, for my sins, I have.

BLACKADDER : And fought with men ?

JACK : With men ? With hills a hundred miles away :

And they returned the compliment, they did—

Sent me a sappy one, with kind regards,

No answer needed : knocked me out, whizz-bang !

Splintered the twin of this fine leg—a pair,

A lovely pair, they were—a trifle bowed

With riding, but such calves, first-prize bull-calves.

BLACKADDER : Ay, your poor leg.

JACK : Well, I've survived the loss :

And, as things are, happen it's just as well

I haven't two to fatten. Crutches, mistress,

Don't need much blowing out.

BLACKADDER : You're naught but bones.

JACK : And aching bones, at that. I've hobbled it

This twelve-month, dot-and-carry-one, till I'm . . .

BLACKADDER : You're starved : but you'll not need to starve again

Nor hobble another inch.

JACK : Jehoshaphat !

You mean . . . You haven't a knife about you, mistress,

To slit my thrapple ? It wouldn't be worth while

To do me in : I didn't strike the diamonds—

Nay, nor a gold-mine out in Africa.

So, that's why you kept harping on . . . I see,
 Mistook me for de Beers or Cecil Rhodes!
 But I haven't a cent about me, not a cent:
 So it would be a pity to dirty your knife,
 And swing for nothing—such a pretty neck,
 I couldn't bear to think it should be broken:
 Though, as for myself, I'd not mind overmuch.
 I'm tired of travelling; and I want to settle;
 And I'd as lief have you as anyone
 Settle me. So, whip out your little pen knife,
 And stick me quick. (*Stretching out his throat*) This
 pig won't squeal. "One last
 Fond look into those eyes of . . ."

BLACKADDER: You've the nerve!

JACK: "One last fond look" . . . But, sharp about
 it, mistress:

I cannot keep my neck stretched out much longer.
 I've got a fit of shivers coming on.

BLACKADDER: And you, on that wet grass! Just take
 my arm:

I'll help you into the cart; and you can sleep:
 You'll feel the better . . .

JACK: Sleep? But what about
 The waking, mistress?

BLACKADDER: You can sleep your fill.

JACK: My fill—I see: and dead men tell no tales?

BLACKADDER: You're not dead yet: and, from this
 on, that cart

Is yours; and you can lie your length in it
 All day, and welcome: no one shall disturb you,
 While I . . .

JACK: Jerusalem! I'm dead already,
 And never knew it! Well, I'd kind of hoped
 I'd have two legs in heaven; but likely enough
 The other's not turned up yet: it would have
 Further to travel; for Africa's a deal
 Nearer the other place. And yet it's had
 Well-nigh a three-years' start: I trust it's not
 Taken the wrong turn, and already frizzling.
 I always thought that angels had blue eyes.

BLACKADDER: Come, up with you, before you shake
 yourself
 To pieces.

JACK: Ay, I've got the shivery-shakers
 This time, and no mistake: I'm in for it,
 It seems, and I don't mind if I lie down.
 You're certain no one will object?

BLACKADDER: Object!
 I'd like to see . . .

JACK: By gox, and so should I!
 'Twould take a man to stand up to those eyes—
 And with two legs.

BLACKADDER: Up with you, or you'll learn . . .

JACK: Here's for the golden chariot!

(BLACKADDER helps JACK into the cart, and settles
 him comfortably with a horse-rug over him;
 and then closes the canvas curtain of the
 tilt.)

JACK (*his voice coming from under the tilt*):
 One thing, mistress,
 I'd like to know before I close my peepers,
 And that's—if we're all carriage-folk in heaven?

(BLACKADDER *does not answer ; but stands gazing with an abstracted air into the fire. Some time has passed, when SLIM JIM and NETTLE return with the basket, followed by HAREHEELS with the mare, which he puts into the shafts of the cart.*)

NETTLE : That's the last errand.

BLACKADDER : Not for you to say.

NETTLE : Nor you.

BLACKADDER : Nor me.

HAREHEELS : You've learnt your lesson, have you ?

You've found your master ?

BLACKADDER : Ay, I've found my master.

NETTLE (*laughing*) : You've tamed her, Hareheels.

Well, I've always held

Men should be masters. Still, I should have judged

She'd have made a bit of a fight for it.

BLACKADDER : Less noise :

You'll waken him.

NETTLE : Waken ? Who the devil . . .

BLACKADDER : Your master.

NETTLE : Hareheels ? But he's not sleeping.

BLACKADDER : I said naught

Of Hareheels.

NETTLE : Well, who else . . .

BLACKADDER : He's in the cart ;

And wants to sleep.

NETTLE : He's in the cart. . . . Not Weazel—

Don't say it's Weazel ! But I saw him straked

And chested, and . . .

BLACKADDER : Your master's in the cart.

NETTLE: Don't tell me Weazel's walking! I can't bide

To think of ghosts.

HAREHEELS: Ghosts—who's afraid of ghosts?

NETTLE: She says that Weazel's ghost's . . .

HAREHEELS: Come back to have His throat slit, likely? Well . . .

BLACKADDER: I said your master Was in the cart.

HAREHEELS: Her master?

BLACKADDER: Ay, and yours: And ghost or not . . .

(BLACKADDER *breaks off, as she sees the face of the soldier peeping out beneath the canvas. SLIM JIM has now come up; and he and HAREHEELS and NETTLE, following the direction of BLACKADDER'S eyes, stare at the cart in amazement.*)

NETTLE: Preserve us!

HAREHEELS: What the devil!

SLIM JIM: Thon's no ghost.

JACK: No, chum, you're right: it seems I'm not a ghost,

Although I fancied . . . But, if this is heaven,
It's hanky-panky about angels' wings;
Or you're newcomers, like myself, and haven't
Begun to sprout . . .

HAREHEELS: You just hop out of that!

NETTLE: So that's the master, your new fancy-man?

HAREHEELS: By gox, I'll settle him!

BLACKADDER: Dare lay a finger . . .

JACK: Now no unpleasantness—I wouldn't have
Unpleasantness on my account. The lady
Just kindly offered me a lift.

HAREHEELS: I'll lift you!
If you don't . . .

JACK: Well, you'll have to lift me, mate:
It's more than I can manage with one leg.

BLACKADDER (to HAREHEELS): You dare!

JACK: Nay, mistress, I've no mind to stop
Where I'm not wanted.

HAREHEELS (*helping him out of the cart*): Well, you've
got some sense.

NETTLE: That, the new master, your new fancy-man—
Thon shivering, one-legged bag-of-bones!

BLACKADDER: You dare!

NETTLE: 'Thon's the braw callant—— Oh, I mind,
I mind,
Your blathering, the night Red Rowan left,
About a braw young callant, galloping
To swing you to his saddle. Well, you're welcome
To him: though, likely, Hareheels has a word
To say to him.

HAREHEELS: I cannot slit the gullet
Of thon lame scarecrow.

NETTLE: And you'd let Blackadder . . .

HAREHEELS: I'm through with her, if thon's the sort
she fancies—
Old daffling dobbies, and hirpling tattie-jacks.

(*He lifts the basket and the dishes into the cart.*)

NETTLE: You're done with her? And a good riddance
too.

I wish her callant joy . . .

SLIM JIM : You hold your gob.
Blackadder, are you coming?

BLACKADDER : I'm not coming.

SLIM JIM : You'd bide with . . . Well, it's no affair of mine.

(HAREHEELS *moves off with the cart and horse ; and*

SLIM JIM and NETTLE *follow down the road.*)

JACK : God save our gracious ! It seems we're left.

BLACKADDER : We're left.

JACK : Babes in the wood, like—though I see no robins :

And I must own I like the wicked uncles
Better than auntie.

BLACKADDER : Nettle, you mean ?

JACK : She would be.

Yet, bless her heart, she didn't put it badly—
A shivering, one-legged bag-of-bones, that's me,
Jack Benson to a T—a speaking likeness,
And no charge made ! Well, I've long had a mind
To marry and settle down. I'm tired of travelling ;
Though I little guessed . . . We never know our luck !
And, happen, you've a fancy to settle ?

BLACKADDER : Settle !

WINTER'S STOB

PERSONS

NEBBY PETER, *an old drover.*

CURLY DODD } *young drovers.*

SPANKER ORD }

WINTER'S STOB

SCENE : *Winter's Stob on a Spring morning. A flock of sheep comes up the road from the direction of Morpeth; CURLY DODD walking in front of them, and NEBBY PETER following.*

NEBBY (*calling*): Hi, lad!

CURLY (*stopping and turning his head*): What's wrong?

NEBBY : I'm going to rest my shanks.

CURLY : So early?

NEBBY : Ay, it's well enough for you,
With your young bones: but when they've travelled as
far

As mine . . .

CURLY : I've come as far.

NEBBY : This morning, ay :
But this is not the first I've walked the world.

CURLY : Nor I.

NEBBY : Oh, you're Methuselah, you are—
The Wandering Jew! How many centuries,
May I make bold to ask, have you been traiking,
Since you first set out from Jerusalem?

CURLY : Who are you getting at? And I'm no Jew—
More like a Jew yourself, with thon hooked neb.

NEBBY : Better a half-moon than a button-mushroom,

If we're for swapping compliments on noses.
 And Jews—well, they're not mongrels, anyhow :
 They're all pure-bred : and devil only kens
 What boggart got you on a worn-out besom—
 Born upon Guy Fawkes' Day and all, I'd fancy.
 But whether or no, I'm going to squat right here.

(NEBBY sits down under Winter's Stob. The sheep spread out, and start grazing on either side of the road.)

CURLY (*looking up at the Stob*) : 'Thon's a queer signpost, with no word upon it,
 And pointing down no road.

NEBBY : It's pointing straight
 The road you're travelling hotfoot, son.

CURLY : What road ?

NEBBY : The road to hell.

CURLY : To hell, yourself !

NEBBY : If you
 Don't brag that tongue, you'll find it's taken you
 The journey at a jump. But sure enough,
 A gey queer signpost ; and it's called a stob.

CURLY : A stob—what's that ?

NEBBY : A gibbet, son.

CURLY : A gibbet ?

NEBBY : Where ever were you reared and educated,
 That you don't ken a gibbet when you see one ?
 Next, you'll be kidding me you never heard
 Of William Winter.

CURLY : Well, I never did.

NEBBY : The ignorance of young folk, nowadays !
 He was a murderer ; and dangled there

In chains, until the corbies picked his bones
Clean as a whistle for the wind to blow through.

CURLY : Who did he murder ?

NEBBY : Old Peggy of Haws Pele,
Down in the bottom yonder.

CURLY : They hanged him here ?

NEBBY : Hanged ! Carties, you don't ken the
difference

Betwixt a gibbet and a gallows ! Well,
I'm mistaken in you : it's the other place
You're ticketed for : old Nick's got little use
For ignoramuses. They strung him up
With his two doxies at Newcastle gaol :
'Then, judging he'd a liking for the spot
Where the three of them had done the gallant deed
Of strangling one old woman for her stocking . . .

CURLY : Her stocking ?

NEBBY : Ay, the one beneath the mattress
She kept her golden leg in—they carted out
His carcase here ; and hoisted it in chains
Where his dead eyes could look down on Haws Pele,
Till his bones dropped from their hinges ; and only his
skull

Glowered on it with eyeless sockets : and then they
gathered

His bones into a sack ; and they hung rattling
Until the rain had rotted that to shreds.

CURLY : A bloody story.

NEBBY : It should be a warning
To the likes of you not to wear heelplates, son.

CURLY : Heelplates ?

NEBBY : Ay, 'twas his heelplates did for him.
 The day before, he'd squatted by the road
 With his two doxies, as you're doing now,
 With hoofs stuck out for all the world to see :
 And a passing herd-lad, with an eye in his head,
 Noted the pretty pattern of his heelplates :
 And when they found the snow about Haws Pele
 Printed with the same pattern, William Winter
 Was done for—corpse-cold as his name already,
 Though little guessing it himself, where he
 Was swilling old Peg's savings with his wenches.

CURLY : To think his heelplates . . .

NEBBY : Likely enough they were
 The very pattern of your own. Since then
 It's only innocents and wattikins
 Have sported heelplates. You've left a lovely print
 Of yours in every patch of clarts we've crossed
 Since we quitted Morpeth.

CURLY : Strike me blue ! By gox !
*(He takes out his jack-knife, and begins hacking
 off his heelplates.)*

NEBBY : Too late to hack them off—though, likely
 enough,
 The trotters have saved you—it's well you went before :
 'Twould take a sharp-eyed 'tec to pick out footprints
 When five-score ewes have paddled over them.
 But let it be a lesson to you, son.
 You thought yourself so swanky with braw heelplates :
 And Winter turned his up for all to see ;
 And he was taken by the heels. It's swagger
 That's many a man's undoing : and some day . . .

And I'm still learning, at three-score-and-ten.
If you don't keep that jack-knife clasped, and clean
For cutting bread and cheese—that's what it's for—
Not cutting out folk's livers . . .

CURLY : And who said
I wanted to cut out anyone's ?

NEBBY : You said it—
Not with your tongue : but you've a pair of eyes
Are tell-tale-tits ; and they'd be evidence
Enough to damn you to the blindest bats
That ever crammed a jury-box. You've got
A speaking countenance, as they call it, son :
Ay, and that flush!—best keep that fire damped
 down,
My fighting-cock, if you'd not kindle hell—
Or anyway, until you meet the woman
Who'll teach you, son, all womenfolk aren't strumpets :
And she'll not rouse the murder in your heart.
I learnt that early, just about your age ;
And that's why I have reached three-score-and-ten.
You follow the draggle-tails of that young fizgig,
You'll hang for her ; but leave her to six-foot-three,
And 'twill be Spanker kicks his heels in air
For doing in her latest fancy-man,
Who'll, happen, wear brass ear-rings, or sport a waist-
 coat
With pearl buttons—I've known scarlet braces
Tempt that sort to go tramping with a tinker.
Son, I was sitting on this very spot,
A year back, when I heard a hubblyshew
Far overhead ; and squinting up, I saw

Two sparrowhawks at grips, with feathers flying,
 And claws locked in each other's breasts. 'Thinks I,
 So that's the game ; and looked out for the hen :
 And sure enough, I spotted her on yon crag,
 Looking on, calm as calm : when another cock,
 Scenting the battle, likely, swaggered up :
 And off she sailed with him, as the fighters dropped,
 One dead, the other with a broken wing.
 If you and Spanker ever come to grips,
 I've a shrewd notion which will fare the worse :
 And sure as fate, the better man will find
 The best has bagged his bird while he's been scrapping.
 Yet, womenfolk aren't all hawks : and I'd the luck
 To learn that early. But I'm wasting wind.
 What a lad's to learn of women, he can learn
 Only from women : and you've had a lesson
 From one sort . . . (*as CURLY springs suddenly to his
 feet*). What the devil are you up to ?

CURLY (*looking down the road*): Spanker, by gox !

NEBBY : Spanker it is, no less.
 Just hand me out that gully, Curly, lad.

CURLY : I'm damned . . .

NEBBY : That's so, if you're forgetting Winter.

(*CURLY takes the knife from his pocket and
 tosses it to NEBBY, without a word.*)

NEBBY (*pocketing the knife*): That's that : and now
 you squat. It's not polite,
 And, what's more to the purpose, none too safe,
 To stand there gaping, when a gentleman
 Like Spanker's walking with his doxy.

CURLY (*sitting down*): Nay,

There's no one with him.

NEBBY: Well, my eyes are not
The eyes they were. And so he walks alone?
Ay, now I see: and judging from his looks,
You might have kept your knife.

CURLY: We'd best be moving.

NEBBY: Nay, till we know, you're safer on your
hunkers:

And what's your hurry, just when there's a chance
Of pleasant company? You're well enough
For common days; but then, to-day's my birthday—
Just seventy-year, to-day, since first I opened
This mug, to give my mammy some advice;
And I'm still wasting good advice on you:
And I've been used to parties on my birthday.
I'm fond of company: I ken they say
"Three's none": but that depends; and for my
part
I've always found three makes things livelier;
Though, happen, it's a stretch to speak of Spanker
As company, outside a coffin-shop—
Lord, what an undertaker there was lost,
When hangdog took to droving! Not the crony
I'd choose, maybe: but, on the road, you've got
Just to put up with aught that comes along:
Ay, and not only on the road—the world's
A lodging-house that takes all sorts of lodgers;
And even in the dosshouse in the basement
We'll not be able to pick our company.

(SPANKER ORD *draws near—a lanky, dour-looking
man. He is walking with his head down;*

and doesn't see NEBBY and CURLY as he strides by.)

NEBBY: Hi, Spanker! What's your hurry? Who is dying

Just for one glimpse of thon bright smile of yours?

SPANKER (*stopping and turning round*): You, is it?

NEBBY: Ay. You took it for the voice Of Winter's ghost?

SPANKER (*seeing CURLY*): And you!

NEBBY: Ay, Curly's with me This journey. He it was who kened you first. I couldn't make out what it was that sparkled Along the road just like a looking-glass, If looking-glasses could go gallivanting, When Curly says: "It's Spanker!" and I said: "Spanker, it is; and bless his sunny smile."

SPANKER: You hold your gob.

NEBBY: It's yours that wants the holding, By the looks of it; but, if you've got the toothache, You've come to the right shop: a splinter of wood From Winter's Stob is warranted to cure . . .

SPANKER: Toothache be damned!

NEBBY: I'm with you there, my friend. The things I've suffered from my teeth—the fuss They made, coming and going—couldn't stay To see me through, they couldn't. But Spanker, boy, Where is your lady-friend?

SPANKER: My lady-friend?

NEBBY: Thon wench . . .

SPANKER: Damn all . . .

NEBBY: Nay, now you go too far.

Damn anything in reason, and I'm with you :
 But all . . . Why, mate, where ever should we be
 Without the ladies? And you didn't seem
 Last night to be . . . You've not deserted her,
 Thon blue-eyed lass—and she without a mammy?
 Shame on you, Spanker : I'd thought better of you!
 How you've the heart to leave thon innocent
 To cry her eyes out for . . .

SPANKER : Deserted her !

She, crying for me !

NEBBY : Who wouldn't ?

SPANKER : Gox, she'll cry
 Before I've done with her ! *(Turns to go.)*

NEBBY : Where are you off to ?

SPANKER : After her.

NEBBY : What, she's left you ?

SPANKER : Ay, she's left me.

NEBBY : Now, how can I believe that ?

SPANKER : It's God's truth—
 Left me this morning for a bloody mugger.

NEBBY : A mugger? Nay—now, if you'd said a
 marquis,
 I might have . . .

SPANKER : Sloped off with him in his cart,
 While I was sleeping : but I'm on their track.

NEBBY : So ho, my sleuth-hound, nosing on the scent !
 Brass ear-rings and a pair of scarlet braces,
 I'll warrant. Hard it is a handsome man
 Like you can't hold them without titivating :
 But that's the way with women—got to wash
 To humour them, even if you are a duke.

So they eloped : and you are following them :
 That's why you're travelling without sheep ? A man
 Looks such a fool without a flock before him. .
 You're tracking them ? You don't, by any chance,
 Wear heelplates, Spanker ?

SPANKER : Heelplates ? What the devil . . .
 You're going dotty—and I'll go dotty, too . . .

NEBBY : Not far for you to travel.

SPANKER : If I stand here,
 Chin-wagging : and I'll lose the track of them.

(SPANKER *sets off, half-running.*)

NEBBY : And never even wished me "happy returns"—
 Though, likely, it's I should have been wishing him . . .
 Toothache ! It's not a splinter from a gibbet
 Will cure his ache, but the gallows' rope itself.
 Yet I can't argue with every loony that's set
 On running his head in a noose : and anyway,
 With jobs that scarce, it isn't fair to the hangman :
 He's got his brats to keep in bread and butter.
 We'd best be moving, too.

CURLY (*rising*) : Give me my gully.

NEBBY (*getting up with difficulty*) :
 Ow ! growing-pains ! Give you . . . I'm not aware
 I've anything of yours about me, son.

CURLY : You thief, you !

NEBBY : Oh, you mean the knife you swapt
 For my advice ? You'll never get that back
 Until you've given me advice as useful,
 And saved my neck. I'm no philanthropist :
 When I want naught, I give as much, no more.
 My eye's been on thon jack-knife, since I lost

My own last night : and it should serve to cut
My bread and cheese till the day I lose my relish
For them and beer—and so know I'm in hell.
Yet, you may have it back, on one condition :
If you will follow Spanker, and plant it deep
Betwixt his shoulder-blades . . . You won't? Well,
 well,
It doesn't seem you set much value on it,
If you'll not do a little thing like that
To get it back. We'd best be stepping out :
And, as you're done with them, I may as tite
Pocket thon heelplates : they might fetch a penny.
One thing I can't abide—that's wilful waste.

KESTREL EDGE

PERSONS

REUBEN ANGERTON, *a young sheep-master.*

GIDEON ANGERTON, *his younger brother.*

NAOMI ANGERTON, *their mother.*

KESTREL EDGE

SCENE: *The parlour of Kestrel Edge, the farmstead of a big sheep-farm on the Border. It is about half-past seven on a November evening. NAOMI ANGERTON, a widow of forty-five, sits with her knitting in her hand, now gazing abstractedly into the fire, now glancing restlessly at the clock. Supper is laid for two. Presently, a sound of wheels is heard without. NAOMI listens, but doesn't rise: and before long REUBEN ANGERTON, a strapping young, well-to-do sheep-master of twenty-five, enters, unbuttoning his greatcoat which he throws carelessly on a chair. He strides to the hearth; and stands with his back to the fire, his hands behind him, warming them.*

REUBEN: A raw night, mother.

NAOMI:

You're back?

REUBEN:

And glad to be so.

The wind's a perisher. I might have come straight from New Zealand—I'm such frozen mutton—could scarcely hold the reins. It's going to snow.

NAOMI: And what's the news?

REUBEN:

The news?—that Kestrel Edge

Has lost the best tup ever bred there.

NAOMI:

Sheep!

I ask for news; and hear you've lost a sheep.

But, happen, you've found something will make up?

When you set out to sell a ram, you don't
Expect to bring him back.

REUBEN : Make up for him ?
Nothing could make up for a tup like thon.

NAOMI : Not even gold ?

REUBEN : Nay, not his weight in gold.

NAOMI : And that would be ?

REUBEN : Somewhere around ten stone.

NAOMI : And how far short's the price ?

REUBEN : I hardly know
What it would turn the scale at, paid in sovereigns :
But it's gey light in notes, not half an ounce.

NAOMI : How many notes ?

REUBEN : Five notes.

NAOMI : Five hundreds ?

REUBEN : Ay.

NAOMI : That's naught to grumble at—a tidy sum.

REUBEN : I could have had it twice over, for two
such tups :

There were two agents, bidding against each other
For Kestrel King.

NAOMI : Pity you hadn't two.

REUBEN : Two, mother ? There has never been a tup
The like of him.

NAOMI : Havers ! You know my father
Got twice the sum for Border Chief.

REUBEN : That's so :
Thon were the golden days for breeding sheep.
But Kestrel . . .

NAOMI : Oh, I'm sick to death of sheep !
It's always tups and ewes, and ewes and tups,

Cheviots and Southdowns, Hedderwicks and Leicesters,
Till I'm sheep-witted with the bleat of men.

Best take your supper.

REUBEN (*seating himself at the table*): Just two
places?

NAOMI: Ay.

I took tea late; and couldn't touch a bite.

REUBEN: Where's Gideon?

NAOMI: How should I know? Like enough
Looking for lost sheep: he's sheep-watty too,
Like all the Angertons.

REUBEN: Gideon? He hardly kens
A Border-Leicester from a Hedderwick.

NAOMI: But he's an eye for black sheep.

REUBEN: True enough—
Reclaiming them, and all—takes after father.

NAOMI: He's half your father: you're the other
half.

REUBEN: Ay, father was sheep-master of two flocks.

NAOMI: Yet, souls or mutton, it was always sheep.
But, all the same, I'm glad you've got that price
Just now.

REUBEN: Just now? We're nothing short of cash.

NAOMI: I'm glad you've got your father's gift with
sheep:
And Kestrel Edge will prosper. Gideon's flock
Of blood-washed sinners wouldn't fetch one-half—
One-hundredth.

REUBEN: Mocker, they're beyond all price.

NAOMI: They should be, from the looks of them—
pure gold

Inside, I'd fancy, instead of flesh and blood.
 But I've a notion Gideon's heart just now
 Is not so set on rescuing black sheep
 As spoiling John Hall of his one ewe-lamb.

REUBEN : What, Hetty?

NAOMI : Ay, and your heart too should be,
 At your age, Reuben . . .

REUBEN : Coveting ewe-lambs?
 I've flocks enough.

NAOMI : Ay, sheep and sheep and sheep!
 Time you were wedded : I'd have gone . . .

(Breaks off.)

REUBEN : Gone where?
 You're not . . .

NAOMI : What am I saying? I only mean
 That I'd feel easier with you settled down.

REUBEN : Easier? Why should you be uneasy?

NAOMI : Well,
 You always were my favourite, and I feel,
 If anything should happen . . . *(Breaks off.)*

REUBEN : What should happen?

NAOMI : Things happen suddenly.

REUBEN : Ay . . . ay, you mean
 Like father's death.

NAOMI : I wasn't meaning that.

REUBEN : I'm sorry, mother : if I'd taken thought,
 I'd not have mentioned . . .

NAOMI : And why shouldn't you mention
 Your father's death?

REUBEN : Well, it's not good to think of.

NAOMI : You're always thinking of it : and you brood;

And brooding's apt to hatch out evil thoughts.
 Everyone knows it was . . . The jury found . . .

(Breaks off.)

REUBEN : The jury brought it in an accident.

NAOMI : And he died suddenly, likely knowing
 nothing—

An easier death than many at his age
 Might look for. I'd far rather die like that
 Than linger.

REUBEN : Ay—but cut off in his prime.

NAOMI : His prime—at seventy? But you're right
 enough :

The Angertons ripen slowly—only reach
 Their prime when they're about three-score-and-ten.

REUBEN : Ay, oaks that bear no acorns till they're
 sixty.

NAOMI : And they're still hale and hearty men at
 ninety.

But I'm no Angerton. I've no time to spare :
 The Kales are not long-lived.

REUBEN : At forty-five,
 Your thoughts are turning to the graveyard?

NAOMI : Nay,

Not to the graveyard yet : but if I live
 Till seventy, two-thirds of life are gone ;
 And I've not yet begun . . . *(Breaks off.)*

REUBEN : Not yet begun?

NAOMI : You wouldn't understand. And I've a deal
 To sort upstairs before I go to bed.

REUBEN : A deal to sort at this hour? That's not
 like you.

NAOMI: Not like the me you know. Yet, I've a
sight

Of things to settle. I'll have no time to-morrow.
But I'll slip down again at ten o'clock
To bid you both good-night. Likely, by then
Your brother will be back—I know the Halls
Keep early hours—and hungry from his courting.
They talk of lovers fasting; but no lass
Has ever spoilt an Angerton's appetite:
And even the loss of Kestrel King doesn't seem
To spoil your relish for your food.

REUBEN: That's so:
I'm doing well: that raw wind's put an edge
On my appetite: and yet I don't much like
Thinking of thon poor sheep, crossing the waves.

NAOMI: True Angerton, fretting for a seasick sheep!
Where is it bound for—Canada?

REUBEN: Nay, mother,
For South America. What ever put
Canada into your head?

NAOMI: Dear knows; but I
Can't stay here, chattering of sheep till midnight:
I've something else to do and think of.

REUBEN: Well,
If only folk would keep their tongues to sheep—
Ay, and their hearts from mischief—it would be . . .

NAOMI: A blessed world!

(NAOMI goes out, shutting the door behind her.)

REUBEN: And it's the devil's own.

(REUBEN turns from the table, and sits brooding
over the fire. After a while the door bursts

open, and GIDEON ANGERTON enters hurriedly, shutting it behind him; sinks into a chair with a groan; and sits with his head in his hands.)

REUBEN: What's up? Don't tell me the ewe-lamb
won't . . .

GIDEON: Lamb?

REUBEN: Ay, Hetty.

GIDEON: Hetty—oh, don't talk of her!

REUBEN: As bad as that? What's wrong?

GIDEON: What's wrong? What's wrong?

The devil has the whole world in his grip.

REUBEN: Just what I said.

GIDEON: You?

REUBEN: Though not so familiar

With Nick as some, mayn't I just mention him

Once in a while: or have you local-preachers

The only right to make free with his name?

But what's upset you now? Don't say a shower's

Sluiced off the whitewash from your precious flock,

And left them patchy piebalds?

GIDEON: You can fleer—

And father lying . . .

REUBEN: Father's in his grave.

GIDEON: His blood is crying for vengeance from the
ground.

REUBEN: Gideon!

GIDEON: Oh, you don't know! Oh, you don't know!

REUBEN: Whisht, Gideon, not so loud: remember
mother.

GIDEON: Where is she?

REUBEN: In her room.

GIDEON: She couldn't hear—
Though soon she must hear: all the world shall
hear . . .

REUBEN: Where have you been?

GIDEON: With Zachariah Dodd.

REUBEN: So . . . and what bitters does old Zachariah
keep nowadays to wet his whistle with?

GIDEON: And you can jest? But you don't know.
O God!

REUBEN: What don't I know? What's he been tell-
ing you?

GIDEON: Reuben, I can't tell how to break it to
you.

REUBEN: Let it burst out itself, if it must come.
So he's been telling you?

GIDEON: How father died.
He saw it all. It was no accident:
It wasn't his own gun that did for him,
'Though everybody thought he'd caught the trigger
Crossing the fence. 'Twas Robert Ellershaw
Crouched in the ditch; and shot him through the
hedge.

REUBEN: And you believe what that old dotard says?

GIDEON: He spoke the truth: he swore it on the
Book.

REUBEN: Yet he said nothing at the inquest?

GIDEON: Nay—
I couldn't understand . . .

REUBEN: He didn't tell you
Why he had held his peace?

GIDEON : He mumbled something
I didn't catch : and I was too distraught . . .

REUBEN : Why did he tell you after all these months ?

GIDEON : He said that he'd lost patience.

REUBEN : He said that ?

GIDEON : I wondered why he did not tell you first.
Happen, he judged I'd better break it to you—
You might do something desperate. But you don't—
Don't seem to realise, somehow : and yet,
Small wonder ! I was struck all of a heap
At first ; and couldn't move.

REUBEN : It's come, at last.

GIDEON : It's come . . . You do not mean you
knew ?

REUBEN : I knew.

GIDEON : You knew, and never . . . O my God !
My God !

REUBEN : I knew before the inquest.

GIDEON : And you let . . .

REUBEN : I let them bring it in an accident.

GIDEON : But, Zachariah ?

REUBEN : I shut Zachy's mouth
With sovereigns and with promises.

GIDEON : But why ?

REUBEN : I wanted time to think—to think it out.

GIDEON : To think it out—your duty plain before
you
To see the murderer hanged ?

REUBEN : Ay, it seemed plain
At first.

GIDEON : Then why . . .

REUBEN : When I began to think,
It wasn't quite so plain. You see . . .

GIDEON : Not I.

Duty is duty.

REUBEN : Ay, but there was mother.

GIDEON : I don't see why . . .

REUBEN : You wouldn't.

GIDEON : Well, I don't.

The shock, of course—but then, she'd had the shock
Of father's death, already : and even then,
You cannot let a murderer escape
Just to spare people's feelings.

REUBEN : So it seems :

But mother . . .

GIDEON : You don't mean that mother knew !

REUBEN : Nay, God forbid ! It was an accident,
As far as mother knew. How could she guess,
When I'd stopped Zachariah's mouth with gold ?

GIDEON : And promises—what promises ?

REUBEN : Of vengeance.

GIDEON : Vengeance—when there's the law ?

REUBEN : I said I'd take

The law in my own hands.

GIDEON : You never meant . . .

REUBEN : I hardly know : I had to keep him quiet
At any cost.

GIDEON : But why ?

REUBEN : To think it out.

GIDEON : I don't see . . .

REUBEN : There was mother.

GIDEON : Always mother !

Reuben, you never mean . . .

REUBEN : I only mean,
If Robert Ellershaw were tried and hanged
For father's murder, there'd be talk.

GIDEON : My God!
Talk! And you'd let a murderer go scot-free
For fear of tattle? What have we to fear?
Justice is justice: and what have you gained?
Murder will out: and Zachariah's blabbed;
And there'll be talk enough now.

REUBEN : So it seems.

GIDEON : I still don't understand.

REUBEN : It's difficult—
And I hardly know if I've a right to say it,
But Gideon, Robert Ellershaw and mother
Are just about of an age.

GIDEON : Reuben!

REUBEN : And father
Was twenty-five years older: and you know
Father was hard.

GIDEON : A just, God-fearing man.

REUBEN : Ay, just, but hard. You never heard him
speak

A kindly word to mother in your life.

GIDEON : Happen; but that's no reason . . .

REUBEN : Nay, God knows!
No reason, but . . . Oh, if I only knew!

GIDEON : You knew the murderer. And you don't
think mother . . .

REUBEN : God knows, I think no harm of her: but
Gideon,

It's long been plain who Robert Ellershaw
Had set his heart on—why he never wed.

GIDEON : You think . . . I never saw . . .

REUBEN : You never saw ;
But other folk have eyes : and if I'd let
Old Zachariah talk, no power on earth
Could have kept mother's name out.

GIDEON : You forget
Your duty to the dead.

REUBEN : The dead are dead :
Our duty cannot save them—bring them back.
And have we got no duty to the living ?
I couldn't let mother suffer.

GIDEON : So, you thought
To spare her ? But you reckoned without God.
God won't be mocked. Oh, you can flee at me,
His servant ; but my God's the God of truth,
And truth prevails. You thought to act a lie.
You saw your duty plain ; and yet you shirked it
Afraid of evil tongues : or, in your pride,
You thought to pit yourself against God's justice.
And now, what have you gained ? But God is just :
You failed him ; and He's chosen me, His servant,
To be His instrument. My duty's plain ;
And I'll not shrink.

REUBEN : Gideon, what will you do ?

GIDEON : Speak out the truth : the law must take its
course.

REUBEN : But it's too late.

GIDEON : How can it ever be
Too late to do God's work ?

REUBEN : If you speak now,
All will come out : you can't tell half the truth.

GIDEON : I'll tell the whole truth. What should I
hold back ?

REUBEN : You'd tell them I knew all before the
inquest ?

And that I stopped old Zachariah's mouth ?

GIDEON : O God, I was forgetting ! Yet, if I don't,
I'll be a traitor too, and to no purpose ;
For Zachariah will not hold his tongue.
He hinted he'd heard something—said he guessed
If we didn't act, and quickly too, to lay
The murderer by the heels, he would escape.

REUBEN : Escape ?

GIDEON : Ay, Ellershaw's leaving Burnshawgate :
He means to fly the country, seemingly.

REUBEN : I've never heard a word of it. He can't
Be throwing up his farm in such a hurry.

GIDEON : Well, Zachariah's sure of it : and it's just
Because it's been kept so quiet, it's dead-certain
He means to sneak away, and hide himself.

REUBEN : To fly the country ? It might be best to
let . . .

GIDEON : You'd never let him go, and put your
soul . . .

But God will not be mocked. The murderer's fate
Is not in our hands. Zachariah threatened
That if we didn't, he would speak out now.
He said he wouldn't sell his soul for gold :
I didn't understand him—now I see.
He is an old man, Reuben, and nigh death ;

And dreads the fires of hell. You promised him ;
 And you've not kept your promise. You'd not let
 An old man go to hell, to stop folk tattling ?
 He said it all came over him at Meeting,
 When I was speaking.

REUBEN : This comes of your ranting ?
 You dangled him above the fiery pit ?

GIDEON : I preach the word of God : I'm but the
 mouth
 God speaks through : and he saw that gold was dross—
 He couldn't take it with him to the next world.

REUBEN : And if he could, 'twould melt, and burn
 his breeches ?

GIDEON : You jest, at such a time ?

REUBEN : What's left to me,
 But jesting ? And, God knows, the laugh's against me.

GIDEON : You promised Zachariah you would act.

REUBEN : I promised him.

GIDEON : Reuben, you lied to him
 That you might shirk your duty : and you damned
 His soul to everlasting. But it's not
 For his sake I would speak, nor for my own ;
 Though I've my soul to save, and his, and yours,
 From the undying fire. I couldn't rest
 With father murdered. Don't you hear his blood
 Crying for vengeance ? And the word of God—
 An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth . . .

REUBEN : It's come.
 I'll keep my word.

GIDEON : You'll speak ?

REUBEN : Nay, it's too late

To speak ; but I must keep my promise.

GIDEON : Reuben !

REUBEN : I said I'd take the law into my hands.

GIDEON : You mean . . .

REUBEN : I mean a man has killed my father,
And he must die.

GIDEON : You mean . . . but there's the law.

REUBEN : The time's gone by for that : and anyway,
If he's to die, why should I thrust the job
Of killing my father's murderer on the shoulders
Of someone else ?

GIDEON : But it's the law.

REUBEN : Whose law ?

GIDEON : But Reuben, you would send your soul to
hell.

REUBEN : My soul has lived in hell for these twelve
months.

GIDEON : Ay—it may be the way that God appoints
For your redemption.

REUBEN : It's the way to spare
My mother. Folk will talk ; but they'll not know.
There'll be no trial, no cross-questioning.

GIDEON : No trial—you mean you'd take your own
life too ?

Reuben, it's terrible—I cannot bear . . .
But it may be God's way to save your soul
Alive. God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform. We cannot see—
Blinded by sin, we stumble. Yet he spake
To Zachariah's heart through me : and now
My words have roused you.

REUBEN : There's no other way.

(REUBEN goes to the gun-rack over the mantleshelf; takes down a gun, and opens it to make sure it is loaded; then moves towards the door, but turns on the threshold.)

REUBEN : Gideon, you'll say " Good-bye " for me ?
(He goes out, closing the door behind him.)

GIDEON : Nay, Reuben,
You shall not ! Yet, God's will . . . He spake through
me.

God moves in a mysterious way. My words
Have roused the sinner's . . . O my God, have mercy !
(GIDEON drops to his knees with a moan.)

SCENE II

SCENE : *The same, an hour later.* GIDEON ANGERTON still crouches on his knees with his hands clasped as though in prayer, but is staring before him with half-crazed eyes. The door opens, and REUBEN ANGERTON enters quietly, shutting the door behind him, and sets the gun in the corner of the room near the door. GIDEON turns and regards him in amazement. REUBEN does not heed him, but sinks into a chair without a word, and sits gazing into the fire.

GIDEON : You have come back ?

REUBEN : I have come back.

GIDEON : I thought . . .
You've done it, Reuben ?

REUBEN : Nay, Gideon, I've done nothing.

GIDEON : Nothing ?

REUBEN : I couldn't.

GIDEON : You have shirked again ?

REUBEN : I've shirked.

GIDEON : But where've you been ?

REUBEN : To Burnshawgate.

GIDEON : And you've come back without . . . He's still alive ?

REUBEN : He's still alive. I went to Burnshawgate :

The snow was in my face—it's snowing now :

I knew 'twould snow to-night, with that raw wind . . .

GIDEON : And you can talk of snow ! Have you gone crazed ?

REUBEN : Happen—it's hard to tell : but I don't fancy I'm crazy now.

GIDEON : You went to Burnshawgate—
And then ?

REUBEN : As I drew near it through the snow—
The snow blew in my teeth, and stung my face . . .

GIDEON : My God ! Speak out, speak out ! As you drew near ?

REUBEN : I saw the parlour-window, lighted up :
It looked so homely . . .

GIDEON : God's destroyed your wits.

REUBEN : Nay, Gideon, hear me out. The blinds were up :

And, as I paused a moment on the threshold,
I saw into the room. It looked so warm
And bright and cosy there, out of the wind—
So safe : and I, out in the wind and snow,

That one might stretch the other stiff and stark,
 When anyway . . . And that could never end it.
 If I had fallen . . .

GIDEON : So, you were afraid ?

REUBEN : Hardly afraid : but, if I'd fallen, Robert
 Could scarcely have escaped a second time :
 And . . .

GIDEON : Nay, by God !

REUBEN : And mother would be spared
 Nothing.

GIDEON : God would have sped the bullet straight
 To the scoundrel's heart : but you have failed God
 twice.

REUBEN : I'm not so sure that God . . .

GIDEON : His curse is on you :
 But I'm His servant ; and I'm not afraid.

REUBEN : Nay, Gideon, listen : God . . .

GIDEON : I will not hearken
 While you blaspheme. You've always been a mocker ;
 And it's the tempter, speaking through your mouth.
 You've let him make his nest within your heart—
 The old serpent ; and it's his, the tongue that speaks.
 But woe to them that take His name in vain !
 And God shall bruise the serpent's head : my heel . . .

REUBEN : Nay, Gideon, listen : it is not for men
 To punish such as Robert.

GIDEON : But God makes
 Of man His instrument of wrath. You'd let
 The murderer escape ?

REUBEN : I'd let him go
 Where he is bound for : but he can't escape

From his own deed : trust God to see to that.

GIDEON : You'd let him go ?

REUBEN : Why not, if Zachariah
Was right ; and Ellershaw is set on flitting ?

GIDEON : Never ! He shan't escape : and anyway,
You've Zachariah still to reckon with.

REUBEN : I'll talk to him to-morrow. With Robert
gone,
The old man may be silenced. He'll never guess
That Ellershaw could be brought back again.
I'll find a way to stop his mouth : he's failing ;
'Twon't be for long.

GIDEON : You may bribe Zachariah
To silence : but you can't buy God with gold,
Or blind Him with the smoke of your burnt-offerings—
They are abomination in His nostrils.
He is a jealous God ; and overturns
The altars of the infidel ; and quenches
The fires of Baal and of Ashtoreth :
And I'm His servant ; and you cannot stop
My mouth . . .

REUBEN : But Gideon, you would never speak,
After I've told you . . .

GIDEON : Robert Ellershaw
Shall pay the price : his blood be on his head.

REUBEN : Hush, Gideon—mother !

*(The door opens, and NAOMI ANGERTON enters.
Neither REUBEN nor GIDEON looks up ; but
both stand with eyes fixed on the fire.)*

NAOMI : You're not quarrelling ?
I thought I heard . . .

REUBEN : Nay, we're not quarrelling.

NAOMI : That's well ; for I'd not have you quarrel to-night.

REUBEN : To-night ?

NAOMI : My last night here : I leave to-morrow.

REUBEN : You leave ?

NAOMI : I'm leaving Kestrel Edge to-morrow For Canada.

GIDEON : With Robert Ellershaw ?

NAOMI (*starting*) : How did you guess ?

GIDEON : O God, and so my mother's A murderer's . . .

REUBEN (*clapping a hand to GIDEON'S mouth*) : Nay ! none of your Bible-talk :

You shall not turn your preacher's dirty tongue On your own mother. (*To NAOMI*) Come, you'd best sit down :

You're faint.

NAOMI (*sinking into a seat, and speaking with a dazed voice*) : But why does he say "murderer" ?

The coroner's jury found . . . the whole world knows . . .

GIDEON : And the whole world shall know it for a lie. It was no accident : your fancy-man . . .

REUBEN : Gideon !

GIDEON : I'll not be hushed. Your fancy-man Slunk down behind the hedge, and shot your husband.

NAOMI : You lie—they fought !

REUBEN : Mother, you didn't know Ellershaw'd killed . . .

NAOMI : Reuben, my son, I knew : And I'll speak out the truth, think what you will.

You cannot judge, till you've come through what I
have ;

Though happen, Reuben, you may understand.

He told me all—though, from the first, I knew :

I never thought it was an accident—

He would have spared me ; but I made him tell :

I wrung it out of him. They fought for me.

REUBEN : For you ?

NAOMI : As many a time two men have fought
For a woman's sake. You cannot understand :

You're boys ; and don't know what it is to love.

GIDEON : He told you that ?

NAOMI : I wrung it out of him.
He only told me, when he found I knew

It was no accident : he tried to spare me.

They fought for me : he heard your father's gun,

And took his own, and went right up to him

Where he was rabbiting ; and challenged him :

And then they fought like men. Your father fell ;

And Robert . . .

GIDEON : Sneaked into his . . .

REUBEN : Hold your peace !
Mother, he lied to you. He lay in wait,

And murdered father—shot him through the hedge.

NAOMI (*starting up*) : Nay, it's not true !

REUBEN : Mother, I fear it's true :
For he was seen.

NAOMI : Seen ? I don't understand—
Who saw ?

REUBEN : Old Zachariah Dodd.

NAOMI : He saw—

And never told?—the inquest . . .

REUBEN : I had stopped
His mouth . . .

NAOMI : You knew, and never said a word?

REUBEN : How could I guess that you knew Robert
had killed . . .

GIDEON : She knew her paramour had killed her
husband :

And she would fly with him.

REUBEN (*to GIDEON*) : Another word,
And I'll . . .

NAOMI (*to REUBEN*) : Still, though you thought I
didn't know,

Why did you hush it up?

REUBEN : I hoped to spare you :
I knew that Robert . . .

NAOMI : Oh, it's all a lie!
They fought—they fought!

REUBEN : Mother, I fear it's true.

NAOMI : I wrung it out . . . Oh, Reuben, you'll
believe me?

How could I dream Robert had murdered him

Cold-blooded? And I'll not believe it now!

Yet, I'd to wring it, word by word, from him.

I thought he tried to spare me. Now I see.

GIDEON : 'Twas his own neck he tried to save.

NAOMI (*sinking to the ground*) : O God,
What have I done!

GIDEON : You're taken in the net
Of your iniquities. God bides His time :
Yet He will not be mocked. He holds His hand ;

But, when it falls! You're stricken to your knees:
 And we should all . . . but I . . . This wicked house!
 God's curse is on us all: and I must go . . .

(REUBEN, *who has been bending over NAOMI,*
looks up.)

REUBEN: Where are you going?

GIDEON: To wrestle with the Lord.

REUBEN (*bending over NAOMI*): Don't heed him,
 mother: Gideon's just a lad.

NAOMI: Reuben, you understand?

REUBEN: I hardly know.

(NAOMI and REUBEN *having their backs to him,*
 GIDEON *takes the gun from the corner, un-*
noticed and steals out of the room. REUBEN
looks up as the door closes; and listens till
he hears GIDEON'S steps in the room overhead,
and then the sound of his voice praying in
loud tones.)

REUBEN: He's gone to his own room. He'll spend
 the night

On his knees till he drops asleep: and in the morning
 I'll see what I can . . .

NAOMI: God has punished me.

SCENE III

SCENE: *The same. NAOMI is still crouched on the ground ; and REUBEN, half-kneeling, bends over her. Presently, NAOMI lifts her head ; and begins to talk slowly, with eyes fixed on the fire.*

NAOMI: No one will understand : but I must speak.
I've had a hard life of it, from the first.
I never knew my mother—never heard
What had become of her, although I think
She wasn't dead. She may be living yet,
For all I know—and she would understand !
My father never mentioned her to me :
And though I searched the churchyard for her grave,
I never found it : and I dared not ask
My father ; and I could not bring myself
To question others, dreading what I might learn.
That was the home I lived in, till the day
My father gave me away—I had no choice :
Who'd ever listen to a chit of a girl,
When it's a question of property and sheep ?
I'd happened to come into my father's mind ;
Or, rather, had forced myself upon his notice :
I'd asked him for some money to buy hairpins,
My first—I see his face now, as he stared.
“ Hairpins ?” he says, surprised : “ a bairn like you !”
Then looked me up and down : and realising
I was a child no longer, knitted his brows,
And pursed his lips, and looked me over again,
The way he'd judge a filly's points, and reckon

What she would fetch him : and next day I learned
He'd chosen a harder man to be my husband.
You knew your father : well, I married him,
Though he was well-nigh half as old again,
And I a lass, just turned eighteen. I lived—
Nay, but I never lived : I slowly froze
Into the block of ice that was my home.
Oh, but I cannot tell—and what's the use ?
No one will understand.

REUBEN : Mother, speak on,
If it will ease you.

NAOMI : And then Robert came.
Until he came, I thought I'd turned to ice,
And never would feel anything again :
And then he came to Burnshawgate. We met :
And I felt the fire I'd thought I'd smothered dead
Leap up to meet his fire. We loved—but you,
You'll never understand : you haven't loved :
And I'd not loved till then.

REUBEN : Mother !

NAOMI : You mean
My sons ? Yes, Reuben, I've loved you in the fashion
A mother loves her babies : but the love
I speak of 's different—different as a furnace
From April sunshine ; and it burned the fiercer,
Having been choked so long, so long damped down.
It burned me through and through. I'd never had
A man's love—and I'd never loved a man.
Some day, you'll learn : and son, you will believe—
I know that you'll believe ; you are not hard—
I was your father's wife until he died :

I had to fight—to trample down the fire,
But never . . .

REUBEN : Mother, I know.

NAOMI : Though, in my heart,
I was all Robert's. When he came, I lived
For the first time ; and life became the thing
I'd dreamt it, as a girl—a thrilling hazard,
A flame that searched and stabbed me, and stung my
 blood

To madness : and . . . I must tell out the truth—
And even when your father died . . . Oh, you
Will never understand !—'twas all a story—
Two men who fought to win a woman's love,
And I the woman ! And when I had wrung
The truth from Robert, or what I took to be . . .
How could I doubt him, when I loved him so ?
Son, I'm not trying to excuse myself,
Only to make it clear . . . and I can't see—
Blood's in my eyes now ; and I cannot see,
Although I had it all so clear just now :
I saw it in the fire so clear. But you
May pity me, son, if you ever love,
If you are ever burnt up by the flame.
Oh, I was blind with pride—I thought they'd fought
For me : and I was blinded by my love—
The love I thought had come at last—my dream
Come true—and it was all a lie. Naught's true
But hunger and heartache : and I'd loved the lie.
And now, what's to become of me ? He said
He'd take me to a new world ; and we'd live . . .
I was to live—to live for the first time.

I tried to hold him—said I couldn't go
 So soon : but he—his word was law to me :
 I loved him more for taking his own way,
 For mastering me, breaking my will to his.
 And now I see all plain ; he was afraid—
 Afraid, my man of men ! He swore they'd fought
 Fairly . . . Oh, I was blind ! He lied to me.
 Your father never lied. And I'm blind now,
 Groping in blood-red darkness. I thought to grasp
 Love ; and it turns to hate that tears my heart.
 If only I could die—if I could die
 To-night—and life was to begin for me
 To-morrow ! (*Starting up*) O my God ! I had for-
 gotten—

He's coming here : he must be on his way.

REUBEN : He's coming here ?

NAOMI : He was to come to see you,
 When I had broken the news, soon after ten.
 What can I say to him, if he should come ?
 How can I face . . .

REUBEN : Mother, you mustn't see him :
 I'll meet him on the way ; and warn him.

NAOMI : Warn him ?

REUBEN : I'll tell him all is known, and he must fly
 To-night, alone.

NAOMI : Yes, he must go alone.

REUBEN : And then, to-morrow, I'll see Zachariah ;
 And stop his mouth.

NAOMI : But Gideon, where is he ?

REUBEN : In his own room. I heard him praying
 there—

Though I cannot hear him now. Happen, he sleeps :
 Yet, it is queer . . .

(Looks towards the corner near the door.)

My God ! The gun—the gun !

NAOMI : What is it, Reuben ?

REUBEN : I'd have sworn I put . . .

NAOMI : He's killing Robert !

*(As NAOMI speaks, the door is burst open ; and
 GIDEON staggers into the room with the gun
 in his hands, and stands before NAOMI and
 REUBEN with eyes of frenzied triumph.)*

GIDEON : God will not be mocked !

He sent the murderer out to meet his doom

Half-way.

REUBEN : You've shot him, Gideon ?

GIDEON : Ay, I've shot him.

I was God's servant ; and He chose me out

To be His instrument of wrath.

NAOMI : O God !

And Robert, now ! Where are you going, Reuben ?

REUBEN : To look to Robert : there may still be
 time—

He mayn't be dead.

GIDEON : He's dead—stone dead : I felt
 His heart, to make quite sure : and then I dragged
 His carcase to the edge of Blackmire Moss,
 And flung it in.

REUBEN : You dragged him through the snow—
 Making a trail ; and then brought back the gun ?
 You're a fine murderer !

GIDEON : I, a murderer ?

NAOMI: Reuben, you shall not! God, what have I done!

REUBEN: Mother, you must keep silence now. We can't Undo what has been done. We can but wait: And if to-morrow bring the worst, it's I Must go with them: and you must speak no word.

GIDEON: Reuben, you shall not give your life for mine . . .

And yet I cannot die—I cannot die. . . .

Murder? It wasn't murder? I was chosen To be God's instrument of wrath—to bring

Confusion on His enemies—yea, I—

The sword of the Lord and Gideon! It's choking me,

The halter: and I feel the flames—the flames

Of the everlasting fire! I dare not die.

'Twas your job, Reuben: and you said you'd save me!

The devil has me in his clutch—the flames!

(He falls to the floor in a swoon.)

NAOMI: I mustn't speak; but let you . . . and live on?

REUBEN: Mother, you'll promise—the last thing I ask you?

NAOMI: I promise, son.

REUBEN: And, mother, you'll not take . . .

NAOMI: Nay, I will live life out—my punishment,

To live life out. I may last twenty years.

I boasted I'd begin to live to-morrow;

And my new life begins. I'll see it through,

My new life—and I've only done to death

My husband, and my lover, and my son!

REUBEN: You must look after Gideon: he's only swooned.

Best not to rouse him now : he'll come to himself
 Only too soon, poor lad. You take his shoulders :
 We'll carry him up and lay him on his bed.
 Then you should go to bed. We must all sleep
 To-night.

NAOMI : Sleep, son !

REUBEN : I shall sleep sound, to-night.
 To-morrow, mother . . .

NAOMI : Son, I know love now.

(REUBEN and NAOMI lift up the unconscious
 GIDEON, and bear him from the room
 and upstairs to the room overhead. Presently
 REUBEN steals back quietly alone. He picks up
 the gun and examines it.)

REUBEN : One cartridge left. I'd better have another
 To make quite sure. I ought to fire two shots—
 One barrel for each. Some one might hear the gun,
 And count ; and wonder. I must take no risks.

(REUBEN goes to a cupboard, takes a cartridge from
 a box, and fits it into the breach of the gun ;
 then stands a moment, gazing into the fire.)

REUBEN : Blackmire, he said. Something to do, at
 last.

(He turns, and steals out of the room, and out of
 the house.)

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